

He never knew it could be...



Love Like This

"Sylvia Hubbard is one of the best author's I've ever read!"

Avid Reader Review

Sylvia Hubbard

LOVE LIKE THIS

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Author's Notes: Originally, this book had Renaldo Bellini as Ethan's attorney, but that was an author's mistake. It's Lorenzo, who is Taylor Bellini's best friend and law partner to Armando Bellini. Now if that is confusing, then you need to read *The Other Side of Love*.

Furthermore, this book was re-edited in December 2012 so if you read the book previously, there may have been a lot of errors corrected and some partial story lines revised and/or added.

Read character linkage notes at the end of the story as well.

Chapter 1

When the sound of her snoring filled the room, Ethan thought it safe to get out of the bed. Lynne was a hard sleeper and he knew the workout he had given her would most definitely put her out until the early morning lights, when she would be craving for more. Picking up the two condoms he had used, he dumped them in the garbage. The slut hadn't even noticed he'd faked an orgasm. He'd been doing this for the past three times they had intercourse. He was trying to be the unsuspecting husband, but it was difficult when the stupid cunt didn't even make an effort anymore to hide her infidelity from him. She just thought he was downright ignorant. Three lovers he'd found already, and he worried there were more of them well placed with easy access to her open arms.

Staring down at her, he felt an inclination to kill her. He could take the thick king size pillow and cover her face up so she would never utter another word again and never enjoy being in the arms of another man. The lying filthy cunt! Damn! Why did she have to be his wife?

Crossing the large bedroom, furnished in black wood and purple - his favorite colors - he picked up her purse and opened the organizer. Did she purposely write in her lover's appointment times knowing he could look, or did she think he was just too dumb to look? Either way, he had found out about the many lovers of Lynne Gray-Black about two months ago. The thought of her sleeping with other men didn't bother him as much as he thought it would. He had never loved her in the beginning. She was just something to do, but when she became pregnant three years ago, he was an honorable man and married her. She lost the baby in its eighth month when she decided to get drunk and crash a brand new Mercedes into a tree at eighty miles per hour. The doctor said the little boy was practically ripped out of the placenta and the cord around his neck choked him to death.

His son had never had a chance and now Ethan wasn't going to give Lynne a chance. He would find something to hurt her, just like she was hurting him. Flipping through her organizer, he found the address he needed and quickly wrote it down. Nanna Gray lived on the west side of town. He knew she owned a Laundromat, which was being run by a stepson, Marvin Clark. Nanna was old and sick from a recent stroke and she was basically home-bound for the rest of her life. But, she depended upon Marvin to keep her business going.

Ethan had hired a detective to investigate Lynne's past and he found out a great deal of information on his wife. Nanna had two daughters, Ecole and Lynne, who were twins. Ecole had been a very bright child, while Lynne was lazy and slow. Ecole had graduated four years early from middle school and completed high school in a year, then went on to college. She married at the age of sixteen to Marvin Clark, but then she died while having a child at the age of seventeen. Marvin was only eighteen and since he had no other family, he stayed with Nanna to help her with the business. Although from the reports, he was more like Lynne--very lazy. But, Nanna had no one else to help her.

Meanwhile, at the age of thirteen, Ethan found out that Lynne had a daughter out of wedlock. No one was sure who the father was, but Lynne didn't care about the child. Nanna ordered Lynne to have the child and give parental rights to her. Lynne obeyed but soon after the child was born, Lynne left the house for New York to pursue a modeling career.

Ethan found her there when he attended a construction convention in the city five years ago, working as an upscale escort. She was great in bed and he convinced her to come back to Detroit and live with him in the outskirts of the city in Auburn Hills. He had a large house in Detroit, but never used it because he never liked living in the city.

Even with his powerful stamina, which he was very famous for, it wasn't enough to satisfy his insatiable wife. She seemed to crave men and he found out through the detective that when he was away at work, she was having two to three trysts a day. Sometimes, they were with more than one man. Realizing this sickened him and he knew he would never have any emotions for his wife for the rest of his life.

This also meant that he could divorce her and she wouldn't get a dime of his money because of the prenuptial agreement his father had her sign. There were pictures, receipts, notes, and witnesses that could attest that Lynne had not been faithful to Ethan.

Yet, this wasn't what pissed Ethan off the most.

Finding his wife making love to his own brother in Ethan's bed was what had pushed him to the limit. He was in the opinion that his father planned it, by sending his son home from an Upper Peninsula job two days early.

Ethan heard noises upstairs and strangely, the rest of the house was empty. Going toward the noises, he knew it was his wife, but then coming around the corner to see the man she was riding was enough to rip his gut out.

After this, Ethan had been completely on the outs with his family, including his father, whom he was sure knew about the affairs long before Ethan caught his brother. Ethan even suspected his father had fallen for Lynne's seductress ways, despite how his father felt about black women.

Lynne stirred in her sleep a little, but this didn't bother him. Lighting a cigarette, he wondered how he would get revenge on his wife. How would he make her so emotionally disabled that he could bring tears to those cold black eyes, stress that perfect cocoa skin and see her gray from the hurt he put on her heart?

When morning came, Ethan had not slept all night. But, he had somewhat of a plan in mind, except he needed to find out more information.

After getting dressed, he picked up the organizer and looked at her schedule. She was due to go over Nanna's house to check on her. Every Tuesday she did this. Ethan had a feeling Lynne was just waiting for her mother to die so she could take control of the Laundromat and sell it off. She had already talked to buyers when Nanna had her first stroke and this weekly visit was only to make people think she was actually concerned about her mother. But in truth, Lynne cared more about herself than anyone else. Whenever Nanna died, Lynne would make a small fortune on the business, which received high traffic due to the location.

Never once had Lynne ever invited him over to see Nanna. She had repeatedly told him he wouldn't be accepted, because of his color, in her part of the neighborhood. She didn't want anybody to bother Nanna in her condition when they found out Lynne had married a white man. She was quick to say color didn't matter to her, but people in the neighborhood wouldn't understand.

He wanted to know what she had to hide over at Nanna's place. Was it the child? It had to be because she never made the effort to tell Ethan about the girl. He had found this out through the detective he hired.

Driving his custom van to the office, he changed into some casual clothes and a baseball cap. With the dark tan he naturally sported and the curly hair with a cap, he wouldn't be recognizable in the hood. He borrowed one of his employee's '93 Dodge Shadow and drove it to Nanna's block to wait.

About an hour into his wait, he saw a female come out the house toting garbage. Since it was cold out, she had on a hat and a thick ankle-length brown coat with a fur collar. The hat was pulled low on her face so he couldn't see her features well. After she dumped the trash in the large black Courville garbage container, she walked in the opposite direction where Ethan was sitting. From the look of her, she couldn't be more than sixteen. But then if that was the daughter, she would have to be nineteen.

Ethan had gotten a brief history on the girl from the detective.

She was very sheltered. Mainly, she took care of Nanna, even going so far as to drop out of high school at fifteen and take care of her grandmother and the home. While getting her GED, at night she worked at the Laundromat and read insatiably. The detective noted that he once saw her reading *War and Peace*. When she wasn't taking care of Nanna or working, she earned extra money tutoring elementary mathematics to children in the neighborhood. Plus, she started to get a teacher's certificate without anyone else knowing that she was sneaking online for a degree. She was a numbers genius according to past teachers. But since she never finished regular high school, many thought she had gone to waste. The detective said that when she turned eighteen, she opened an account and deposited money earned from tutoring, without her uncle knowing about it.

Her personality was invert. She didn't go anywhere other than home or work.

The uncle was a different story. He had married Lynne's twin, Ecole Gray, and now stayed permanently at Nanna's home after his wife died in labor of their first child, who also died. Ethan was positive no one knew about the man's penchant to visit the city casinos and bet a thousand a night, wasting money and borrowing from the wrong people. They were carless and almost houseless because of this man. He was slowly deteriorating the family business by taking money from the business to support his gambling habit. According to the detective, he owed a lot of money to the wrong people, who would kill him if he didn't pay up soon.

Ethan didn't follow the girl. He waited another hour, when Lynne finally pulled up in the driveway. A man came out who stood about six feet, very lanky and ungroomed. Lynne got out of the car and gave him a long kiss on the lips. They laughed together at something he said, and then with a swat to her butt, they rushed in the house.

Putting out the third cigarette, Ethan got out of the car and went around the alley until he got to Nanna's backyard. He climbed the fence and went around to various windows until he found the one he wanted.

They were half locked in an embrace, desperately trying to get their clothes off, kissing and rubbing each other all over. She was a nymphet, craving every touch he placed on her body with his hands and mouth. Ethan could hear their groaning and panting outside the window.

"Damn baby, you so wet!" Marvin moaned as he plunged repeatedly into her. She clutched him as if her life depended on it.

"Ohh baby, I'm coming," he warned.

"Not yet," she begged.

"Oh shit."

"Not yet."

"Arrrrrrrrgh."

"Damn!"

He collapsed on top of her, his body shaking as if he were having a conniption, and then relaxing. "I'm sorry baby," he said, panting into her neck. "I'll hold out longer next time. You just so good to my dick, I can't help it."

She cursed again. "You said that shit last time, Marv." Angrily, she pushed him off of her and put her clothes back on. "Where is she?"

He sluggishly put his clothes on, too. "Nanna's sleeping."

Lynne smacked him on the back of the head. "I'm not talking about the old bat, you idiot. I know Nanna sleeps all day. I want to know about the brat."

"When you called and said you'd be here in five, I sent her to the Laundromat like usual. You said you didn't want her around when you're here."

"I know what I said," she snorted, combing her thousand-dollar weaved, waist-length light brown hair. "I talked to the doctor and he said Nanna's not going to make it past the New Year without a transplant. But he didn't think he could push her up on the list anymore than what he had already done. In any case, I talked to the lawyer and she hasn't changed her will either. Me and you still get everything and we can push the brat out the way easily once the old bat is out the picture." She lit a cigarette and smoked it slowly. "Did you stop the aspirins?"

"It's pretty hard when the kid is around. She takes care of the old lady out of habit. It's like if Nanna's sick, she don't function well and until Nanna's out the way, we need her for the business. The better the books look to the investors, the higher we can sell. The kid keeps everything running smoothly."

Lynne poked him in the chest with her hundred-dollar manicured nails. "You'll just tell her to concentrate on keeping the business running while you take away those pills. Those are about the only thing keeping that bitch's blood from clotting. If we can get one more stroke by the end of the year, we can have a nice New Year's Day funeral."

"What about your husband?"

"What about him? He has no clue about anything, and I do mean anything." She put the cigarette out and took out her organizer. "He's got a big meeting downtown and he won't be back to the Hills until a week from now. But who cares. I got people to see and places to go."

"You gonna tell me that rich cracker gives you all that shit and money, then don't give a shit what you do?"

"I got him wrapped around my finger, lover. Just like I got you." With that, she gave him a very generous tongue bathing with her mouth to his. It was disgusting to watch, but Ethan watched anyway, interested in how the lovers interacted. The man was clearly pussy whipped with Lynne, just like his brother and the other men she slept with. He was glad that he had awakened to smell the bullshit Lynne dealt out, and it didn't smell pretty at all.

"You want some more?" he asked amazed.

She went over to her purse to fix her lipstick. "Later, I got to spend some of my husband's money. Then I'll be back later to say hello to the old bat."

Ethan ducked when he saw her coming to the window.

"When you come back baby, I'll be already for you," Marvin promised, following her to the window.

Ethan pressed his large body against the house, praying she didn't look down as she opened the window to air out the smoke and the smell of sex. He didn't move until he heard their footsteps move away from the window. Then he ran to the back and leaped over the fence. His long thick legs carried him down the alley in a hurry.

He was so intent on getting back to the car that he didn't see the person coming up the alley to duck into it. They bumped so hard into each other; Ethan fell back hard on his butt. When he was able to gain his balance and stand up, he looked around to where the other body had fallen. It was a female he bumped and when he looked down at her, he gasped, not believing he was looking into a younger more beautiful version of Lynne.

She scrambled up and took his hand, pulling him to the side of the garage belonging to the first house on her corner. A car was coming toward them, but before he could look to see if it was Lynne, the girl was pulling his face down so he could kiss her.

The feel of her lips against his was a rush to his system. The thrill of her sweet innocent taste on the tip of his tongue made him forget where he was and the cold biting at his ears. Her fingers moved up his nape and wrapped

in his hair as she deepened the kiss, parting her lips, inviting his own tongue in to taste her. The soft moan escaped her throat as he pressed closer against her receptive body, wrapping his arms around her slim waist. She teasingly licked at the corners of his mouth, creating a totally new sensation for him, taunting his manhood to come alive.

The feel of his arousal against her stomach must have made her aware first of their surroundings, because she broke the kiss breathlessly trying to push him away.

Reluctantly, he let her go. "What the hell did you do that for?"

"My mother was coming around the corner," she explained. "I didn't want her to see me and I didn't know what else to do." She looked him up and down. "You aren't from around here, are you?"

He wiped his mouth, as if the taste of her disgusted him. "That's none of your fucking business," he sneered.

"If kissing me was that bad, why didn't you stop it?"

"Shut your mouth, little girl."

"You're the one out of your neighborhood, cracker." She started walking in the opposite direction from her home.

He watched her walk away, wanting to say something, but too upset at himself for acting like a child to call her back. Had she been spying, too? Did she know about what they planned on doing to Nanna? Marvin said the kid was protective of the old woman and the detective had said the child had a lot of smarts.

He wanted to know more about her.

Chapter 2

Byron knocked on the glass for the third time. "What the hell is wrong wit' ya girl?" he snapped.

Cleo came to her defense from behind her. "Shut up and git your change elsewhere ya big bully."

Byron's beady little brown eyes gave Cleo a "why-don't-you-shut-your-mouth" glare. "Cause I can get it here, whore."

Being called a whore didn't bother Cleo. "Don't you read, asshole?" She pointed to the sign above Nicole's head, which read, "NO CHANGE OVER TEN." Marvin had instilled that rule because some of the cashiers were being short changed.

Byron looked directly at Nicole. "Give me the change, Nick, or I'll tell your Unc you've been giving out favors like your whore friend does."

Nicole took the twenty he slid under the bullet-proofed glass and changed it out quickly in the drawer. When she set the bills back under the glass, Cleo grabbed two dollars.

"Give me my money, whore," Byron ordered, pounding on the glass.

Cleo giggled. "That's change cashing fees, asshole." She threw the bills in the tip cup by the glass. "Now get your scrawny self out my face."

He hit the glass with his fist one last time before walking away.

"What's gotten into you, Nicole?" Cleo asked.

"Nothing."

"You've been staring at page two of that book for the past hour and there's nothing wrong? Is your uncle pestering you again?"

Nicole blushed, looking over at Cleo. The woman had worked here for the past year. This was her second job next to working at KFC across the street in the afternoons. She had six kids and paid the bills however she could. Cleo was in her late twenties, but she looked older because of the cigarettes and liquor she'd took in all her life. Her smoky black eyes, with a red-yellow hue around them, seemed old and dull, while her nappy short hair that she kept in a low-bleached blonde afro seemed weary. There was a girth about her from all the bastards she had produced, but that didn't stop the men from coming in real late at night and putting a twenty in the money slot when she worked the window.

All Cleo would say is, "I'm going on break, Nicole," as she stuffed the twenty in her blue jean pocket and went out onto the floor. The man would follow her into the women's bathroom and for twenty minutes, Cleo would get their rocks off.

When Nicole asked her what exactly she did to those men, Cleo went into detail about her oral escapades. "If I want more money, I hold their balls when they're good and tight and I ask them if they want to fuck me for twenty more. Most say, "Yes," and I give them a good ride while they sit on the toilet. Then I don't let them come in me, but I put it back in my mouth and spit it out in the toilet after they come. They think it's good."

After pushing away her disgust about the whole thing, Nicole thought the idea of it was kinky, but she would never do it. Sometimes, the ones who had only heard of Cleo came to the window when Nicole was there. When they would shove the twenty in the money tray, she wouldn't even look up at them, but point to the sign. They would get the message and leave or wait around until Cleo came to the window.

She answered Cleo's question. "No, he hasn't lately. He's been in my mamma's drawers."

"Oh yeah, it is Tuesday. Is that what's bothering you, child?"

"No." She moved away from the window to help Cleo finish folding the clothes. They also did dry cleaning and private washing for a lot of the sick and elderly in the area for a monthly fee. She told Cleo of the stranger she saw sneaking around the neighborhood that morning.

"You kissed him?!" Cleo cackled.

"Hush or everybody in the neighborhood will hear your mouth."

"I can't believe you actually let some boy kiss you."

"He wasn't a boy." She smiled wickedly, remembering what had been pressed against her stomach and the taste of him. "He tasted like a man to me."

"How did he look?"

"White, but cute."

"Oh dear Lord, tell me the girl didn't kiss no white boy."

"I said he wasn't a boy."

"Don't be falling for those blue-eyed devils, child."

"Don't get the Malcolm X religion up in here, Cleo," she snorted. "I'm not falling for no one; I was just wondering what he was doing in the neighborhood."

"You know white people been moving back to this neighborhood all the time, but you don't need to go around dating no white boy. Didn't you say your mamma married one?"

"Yes, but so what. They live a long way from here and I heard her say he doesn't like the city. He does his business and leaves as fast as possible."

"They all do that. I had a few do their business when I used to work the corners on the east side. Trust me love, it ain't all that and they just want a black woman to fuck, just like that white man wants your mamma. Why you think he ain't caring who she fucks?"

Nicole confided in Cleo about her mother and Marvin's relationship. She had heard phone conversations of her mother talking to other men and what she was going to do to them when she got over to them. It was no secret around the neighborhood that Lynne Gray was a whore. She'd fucked everyone in the neighborhood and around the city.

It didn't matter to Nicole, although some of her mother's former beaus sometimes got her mixed up. Nicole was a shade darker than her mother, and she had Nanna's hair coloring of burnt brown hair instead of her mother's black hair. Along with that, there were some features that distinguished Nicole from her mother if one looked closely. She had a pudgier nose than Lynne and her fingers were longer with healthier nails, which Lynne kept covered with manicured faux tips. Nicole was two inches taller also, at five foot six and a half.

Still, people had the tendency to mix her up and even call her Lynne, which she hated to be called.

"So tell me about how he looked in detail and if you dare say he was tall, dark and handsome, I'll rip your tongue out."

Nicole giggled. "He wasn't as tall as Marvin. Maybe an inch shorter, but he was definitely bigger than my uncle. He was cut and I could feel ripples when he pressed against my chest."

"Ripples? Damn, did you make him undress?"

"Let's just say, I was aware of a lot of things."

Cleo smiled wickedly. "What else?"

"He's strong. That's the reason I stopped because he was squeezing me so hard against him, but I didn't half mind. He was clean-shaven with dark blonde hair and the prettiest green eyes I have ever seen. Like jade." Her look went far away again. "He smelled like...expensive cologne and cigarettes."

"So he smokes?"

"That would be the reason why I smelled it, but he tasted like a man. A real man. Not some sweaty, nasty bad-breathed ass."

"I thought you said all men would taste like that," Cleo teased.

"I know I did and before I kissed him, they all did. I don't think it had anything to do with his color, either. I think he was naturally like that."

"I think you lost your mind."

Cleo closed the bag and stapled the order ticket on it.

Someone knocked on the window for change, but when the twenty came through the slot, Cleo smiled knowingly and took the bill. "I'll be out in a minute, sugar lips," she promised the old man in the long trench coat.

"I'll finish this up," Nicole said, giggling as Cleo freshened up quickly.

"Thanks darling. After this john, I'm stepping out, too. Hold the fort down 'til I come back in a moment."

Nicole finished up the work and then sat back by the window to try to finish up her lesson. She was two months ahead of the school load, but that didn't matter to her. The sooner she finished, the faster she could get out that house and when Nanna passed away, she wouldn't just be put out. She would have a nice job waiting for her, although she enjoyed the Laundromat business.

If she ran the joint though, there wouldn't be any hanky panky like Cleo was doing. But she didn't run the joint and Marvin didn't mind the cashiers making some extra dough on the side, just as long as he got a cut of it. They'd slip him the money by making their drawers come up over an extra forty bucks.

Nicole had told Nanna about the dirty dealings and Nanna was upset, but she assured Nicole she had taken care of things and soon no one would worry about the business, but Nicole. She had no idea what her grandmother meant by that, but Nanna was still strong mentally although her body was giving up physically.

She prayed for Nanna's good health every day, but she and Nanna knew their time together was coming to an end.

A ten came through the money slot and without looking at the face, she picked up the bill, made sure it was real, then put five ones and a five dollar bill in the slot. When the stranger continued to stand there, she mumbled, "Can I help you?"

"If you don't mind," he said.

His voice instantly caught her ears and she looked up into the sea of green she had just been telling Cleo all about. "What are you doing here?" she asked clearly upset.

"I'm washing my clothes, or do you do other things in this Laundromat."

She looked toward the bathroom. "Nothing you'd want." She picked up her book to ignore him again, but he didn't move away from the window. Did he naturally look cuter by the minute or was it just too late at night for her. "Can I help you?" she snipped, not at all liking the way her emotions were acting with him. It wasn't in her nature to be so perturbed all the time.

"I need your assistance. I've never worked these machines before and I can't turn it on. I think it's broke."

"Did you read the instructions?" she asked.

"Please, come help me," he begged again. "I need assistance."

"What did you break?"

"The dryer completely stopped and I have already put my clothes and money in. Are you going to get me a refund?"

She gave him a long, hard look then looked around in the lobby. At midnight on a Tuesday, there was no one around washing their clothes. So why was this idiot out here tonight? "You wouldn't happen to be following me, are you?" she asked suspiciously.

He snorted in disgust. "I've got better things to do than chase around little girls."

Cleo had gone out on her usual midnight run of Coney Island and cigarettes. She wouldn't be back for another ten minutes. This would be the only time Cleo would be able to leave the store because Nicole's shift ended when she came back. Coming out of the booth had never been dangerous, but she didn't really trust or like the man to begin with.

Grabbing her tool belt, she let herself out the booth, making sure the door was locked. She allowed him to lead her over to where he had set up to wash and dry his clothes. She was able to see the back of him and noted for a white man, he had a generous helping of behind to go along with thick muscular legs. Whatever he did, he worked hard at it. On the back of his leather jacket was "BLACK'S CEMENT - Made in America."

When she bent down to look at the dryer settings underneath the dryer, he asked, "You work well down there?"

Nicole didn't know if he was trying to be funny or make general conversation. She decided either way, she would ignore his question. Quickly she found the fuse slightly popped from the dryer box and pushed it back in. Just as she stood up, she felt something brush against her backside and she gasped sharply, turning to him.

Before he could explain himself, she hauled off and slapped him in the jaw. "You pervert!" she seethed, then ran to the booth doors and locked herself back in.

He came up to the window. "What the fuck was that for?"

"You tried to fondle me, you dirty old man."

"I'm not old and if truth be known, just yesterday you weren't trying to get away from me touching you then."

"I only did it to hide from my mother seeing me. I told you that! Get your things and get the hell out of here."

"You're one crazy bitch, you know that. You backed up against me when you stood up."

She gasped as if he'd accused her of lying. "I did not. Don't you dare try to make this look like I'm the one at fault. If you want to throw out some truths, then you weren't dying to stop kissing me either, and the reason I had to push you away was because you would have raped me right there in the alley."

He looked honestly angry at her accusation. "I would not. You started it!"

"And I had to finish it, too."

Cleo came through the front door and they were just glaring at each other. "Is everything alright, kid?" she asked, observing both their expressions from the other side of the window where he stood.

"I'm fine. Some people just don't understand what 'No' means."

"Sir, if you're giving her trouble," Cleo warned, "then you can take your stuff and leave."

He didn't even look at Cleo, but turned away and went to the dryer. Nicole hurriedly let Cleo in.

"What did he say?"

"Nothing." Nicole packed her books and notes up in her backpack. "I'm going home now. I'm really tired."

Cleo said worriedly, "Maybe you should wait until he leaves."

"He's a bunch of hot air, Cleo. I'm really tired and Nanna has visitors tomorrow. I need to get some sleep, but I have so much to do at home."

"You want to take my car and just pick me up in the morning?"

Nicole tiredly shook her head. "I'll be okay."

"I'll give you money for a cab ride."

"Please Cleo, stop it. I'll be fine." She put on her coat and hat, and then walked out the Laundromat in a hurry, not giving the stranger one more look. But she could feel those cold green eyes on her, piercing into her back, as if he wanted to cut off her air supply with just a look.

Once out in the midnight early December air on the west side of Detroit, she started home, not caring about anything, except walking fast and being safe. She pushed thoughts of the stranger out of her mind. Maybe he was just new to the neighborhood.

Chapter 3

Two weeks later, Cleo came in at ten at night as usual, but she looked pretty excited, as if she had won a million dollars.

"What's your problem?" Nicole questioned, peeking up from her books.

"I found out that someone bought the two houses next to me."

"Who?"

"I don't know, but I like new neighbors."

Cleo just lived two blocks away from the Laundromat. It was a great walking distance, but she insisted on driving her car. Nicole's house was about nine blocks away. A nice hike, except when it was cold out and visibility was shit. Cleo had been complaining of the horrible conditions of the houses next to her for the longest and her kids couldn't play outside because homeless people, drug dealers and users always occupied the open homes illegally.

"This morning, just as I was crawling into bed after dropping the kids off to school, I heard this awful pounding and I went outside to cuss whoever was making the racket out. This man was there from some construction company. They were closing up the houses so they can stop the draft to start working on them. He asked me when I sleep and I told him. He was the nicest white man I've ever met – not like that ass that was in here a couple of weeks ago. He told me that he's making sure they didn't do any heavy construction during those times."

"That's great. Now the kids can get out your hair and get some fresh air."

"I hope so. He said he's going to put a security fence around the property so no one will be breaking in and not to worry because at night, someone would be looking in on the houses and if I wanted, they could watch over my place, too."

"Who is this man?"

"I don't know."

"What construction company?"

"I don't know."

Nicole decided not to question her anymore, becoming frustrated with Cleo's evasive answers.

The night went like usual and after Cleo came from her food and cigarette run, Nicole left. While she was walking home, she had this strange feeling someone was watching her. Hurrying up her step, she got home safely and didn't think anymore about it.

She changed Nanna's sheet and fed her grandmother until the exhausted woman fell asleep. Nanna's breathing was very shallow and Nicole prayed at her grandmother's bedside that a new heart would come soon. Losing the only person in the world to care for her would be devastating.

After combing Nanna's stringy hair, she went out to the garage where she knew the student she tutored had left assignments or letters about her reports. Plus, others who knew she was sneaking for her degree and allowed her to use their address would leave her mail there as well.

There was a letter from the school she was getting her degree out of:

Dear Ms. Gray,

You are well on your way to finishing your degree, teacher's certificate and Associate in Bookkeeping. We are proud to note that you have a 4.0 GPA and only one course left for both of your majors.

The letter went on to note what she received on her last paper and test assignments. Quickly, she scanned the letter until she got to the end:

Due to your rapid success in the program, we must request that you send in the final payment before we send you the last of your lessons. The amount of \$1000 is needed to complete this process. This cost also contains your graduating certificates and references needed, plus the rest of the supplies and books.

Where was she going to get that kind of money from? She only had six hundred saved because she didn't expect to finish the course so quickly. Marvin would know if she tried to get any money and she didn't want to get thrown in a closet again for taking any money like she did before, even though the check was in her name. Marvin wasn't stupid when it came to money matters and he kept track of every dime that went in and out of the house and business.

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Getting in on her shift the next day, she looked over the books while the other cashier ran the window. As usual, Marvin had been making withdrawals out of the bank account and this made her short on supplies. His

withdrawals were becoming larger and larger. So she decided to pay off the bills two months in advance, writing a note that something had bounced due to his withdrawals and payments were requested like this until after the New Year. He wouldn't catch on until after the New Year. Nicole had lied, but hopefully he would be too lazy to look back on the history. Nanna had said she was drawing up new power of attorney papers and would make Nicole sole heir.

As much as Nicole cared about the business, she cared about Nanna more. She didn't want her grandmother to go away.

At nine, Cleo's oldest daughter of fourteen called to let Nicole know that her mother had to rush the youngest child of one year old to the hospital because of an ear infection. It would be doubtful if Cleo could come in to work. Nicole knew if Marvin was told, he'd tell her to fire Cleo because this was her fourth time calling in in this month. Instead, she decided to work the shift. It would be slow on a Wednesday night, so she didn't have anything to really worry about. She asked the other cashier to stay for an extra hour while she got herself something to eat, then she let the girl go.

Delving deep into her studies after doing all the orders, at twelve, she wasn't aware of someone walking up to the counter until someone slipped a twenty in the money slot.

As before this one, she pointed to the sign without saying a word, hoping the john would go away.

Another twenty was laid on top of the first. "Can you read-" she was cut short as she found his eyes of green unusually breathtaking. Did he know how beautiful they were? Biting her lip from any smart comment she would have said, she said, "Whatever you want, I'm not that type of girl."

"What type of girl are you?"

"What type do I look like?" she snapped. He was purposely edging her into a verbal conflict.

"A sixty-dollar whore?" With that, he placed another twenty on top of the other two.

She looked down at the money, then back up at him. Deciding to play his game, she said, "Can't you find someone else to bother?"

"I'd much rather bother you."

"I don't like you. I don't like anything about you."

He leaned on the counter and lit a cigarette. "Feelings mutual, but a man's got needs and right now I want to finish what you started behind that garage."

"There's nothing to finish."

He took a long drag on the cigarette, giving her a skeptical look. "Rumor has it, for a good time, I can come in here about this time, set some bills on the counter, and you'll take me somewhere private and show me what a real woman can do."

"I wouldn't give you a good time if you paid me a hundred dollars. I told you I don't do that."

"Then who does?"

"The other girls, I guess. I don't and I won't with you."

"Is it just me or do you give your favors out to all those black men that come strutting up in here to pester you?"

Nicole decided to keep him guessing. "That's none of your business."

He took one more drag on the cigarette before grounding the butt out in the tray on the countertop. "How much is it going to take for you to please a white man like me?" There was a cruel intent in his tone of voice, but she ignored that.

Continuing his verbal play, she leaned in the glass to give him her best seductive stare. "You couldn't afford me," she whispered.

"How much?" he asked again, his eyes practically dancing like green Christmas tree lights now that he knew she was going to play with him.

Did he crave verbal foreplay? Was that how he got his kicks? Making someone angry, then sink to his level. Oh she would get him good. "Five hundred dollars."

He flinched and she smiled triumphantly. "That's a lot. What do I get?"

She shrugged, not letting him see she was completely out of her territory. This was Cleo's business. "A lip job," she said, borrowing Cleo's terminology.

His eyes widened. "That's it? All I get is a good lip job? Hell for five hundred dollars, I could buy a whole lot of crack whores on the corner and go to town for a day and a half in any hole I please."

"Then go down the street and get them, but here you pay for good and clean."

"How will I know it's worth it?"

She knew this idiot couldn't have that much money on him, but she decided to tease him by leaning close to the window. If she dropped her shoulders and pressed her bosom almost against the glass, it gave him a nice view down her shirt. "I'll make you scream for mercy."

"Damn!" He lit another cigarette and puffed even harder, as if he were deep in thought. "But five bills is a lot."

She sat back in her seat, loving the tease she had suddenly become. "You want a good time with me? That's what you have to pay."

"So you're going to guarantee me a lip job if I set five hundred dollars on this counter."

Knowing full well he couldn't have money like that walking around in the hood, she said, "Yep, if you do it right now."

He started puffing that cigarette like it was his life depending on it. "What about for five hundred dollars, I get two days worth of lip service? That's two-fifty a day, payable at the end of the service."

"You're trying to strike a bargain with a whore? Next thing you want is a warranty, huh?"

"It crossed my mind, but I'd at least like a verbal promise I'd get everything I paid for."

She laughed at his silliness, then nonchalantly shrugged. "You set a five hundred on the counter right now, and you've got me for two days for lip service; and only lip service I promise no take backs."

It was his turn to smile triumphantly as he grounded out that cigarette in the ashtray, and then reached in his back pocket to pull out the thickest wallet she had ever seen. He scooped up the three twenties and watched as her mouth dropped open when he laid five crisp new hundred dollar bills out on the counter and then pushed it into the money slot. "Shouldn't you be saving some of that saliva for me?"

Quickly closing her mouth, she glared up at him. "You had every intention of offering me whatever I asked."

"Maybe, but that's neither here nor there. Do you keep your promise?"

Nicole hated the idea of giving him any satisfaction, but she was a woman of honor. Besides, she'd always wanted to know how it felt. She'd seen it done enough and heard about it enough to be considered almost an expert at it, but actually doing it would be a whole new experience for her.

He started to take the money out of the slot, but she touched the top of his hand.

"Give me a moment."

"I don't have a moment. At five hundred dollars, your time is my time."

She picked up the money and counted it slowly twice, then laid it down on the counter in front of her, still staring at the bills in disbelief.

"Times a wasting, woman."

Straightening her spine and throwing her head back, she impersonated Cleo down to the cold glazed overshadowing of her face as she took the money and shoved it in her pants. "Give me a moment, sugar lips," she said, sliding from the seat. Going over to Cleo's drawer, she found a breath mint. She always saw Cleo put one in her mouth before going out. She grabbed her keys and went out of the door. She locked the front door with the electronic lock. If any customers wanted to come in, she could use the buzzer to let them in. He stood down there waiting for her and she avoided looking at him.

"If you can ace a home course in less time it takes to piss, you can certainly handle this cracker like a rag doll," she told herself confidently.

Nicole took a deep breath and continued Cleo's disposition by switching her hips with a look of assurance to her body. Opening the door to the ladies room, she let him walk by her. She always watched as Cleo went in, but once the door had closed, she didn't know what to do.

The first logical thing was to turn on the lights, which he did once he entered. She went over to the toilet and put the seat down. As she faced him, he'd already crossed the distance between them in one long stride, pulling her into his arms and capturing her mouth before she could say anything.

She remembered his taste well and found that she was craving it once again. The hat on his head was knocked to the floor as she ran her fingers through his nape length blonde hair, loving the feel of it between her fingers as his mouth possessed her own. They moved like old lovers, touching, rubbing, and feeling everywhere, wishing the clothes were not present. Forcing herself to take control of the situation, somehow they'd maneuvered back to the door and she was pressed hard on him so that his back was against the door. One hand continued to hold his head in place while her lips ravaged his mouth, cheek, ears, and lips. Her other hand found his pants and began to unbuckle them. Her skills with opening clothing in the Laundromat came in so handy that she was able to open his pants and push them down without releasing her mouth from his.

As Cleo had said, initially they fight it, and by his strain he was definitely fighting what she was doing to him. He tried to pull her back in his arms as she slowly lowered to her knees.

"Shouldn't we sit?" he asked unsure.

"Does it matter?" she whispered huskily, right before she engulfed him deep into her oral cavity.

He gasped and she was positive she saw his leg vibrate from the passion she had erupted in him. Her eyes closed as she remembered Cleo's detail instructions, moving her hands inside his thigh, between his legs and around his buttocks as her mouth hungrily worked to bring him to please. She kept her teeth securely covered by her lips while she also kept a firm grip on him. While doing all of this, she moved her tongue voraciously around the tip, enjoying how his body was fighting, then succumbing, then fighting.

Just when he was giving up the fight, she slowly crept her fingers up and gently pulled at the base of him. The whimper of mercy from him made her smile and she brushed her teeth mistakenly over the sensitive tip. He grabbed the door handle for balance as his legs almost buckled underneath him.

She gasped as he filled her mouth, giving her no choice but to swallow as his large shaft pulsed between her fingers and lips. A film of sweat covered his entire body and intimately enjoying the scent of him, she buried her nose into his blonde hair, loving the soft feel of the follicles on her face. His member was still hard, but somewhat drained, yet she had a feeling if there was more she had promised him, nothing would stop him from laying her on this floor and taking her until the morning dawn. Reluctantly, she took a deep breath, testing the rawness of her lip and the soreness of her jaw. He was backed in the corner of the door.

Nicole went so far as to carefully adjust him and fix his pants, then she gave him a simple kiss on his chin. Soon as she drew away, those intense greens opened and held her gaze. She felt her breath catch in her throat. It wasn't fear she felt.

His arm drew her into him, molding her body against his. Then he kissed her forehead, her eyes, then trailed his wet tongue down until he entwined the tip with hers. She moaned softly, loving his kisses very much. He was older and knowledgeable, and she was positive he would be able to please her very much if given the chance.

"What the hell are you thinking? What the hell are you doing?" she thought.

Pushing away, she wiggled desperately out of his arms. She could tell he wanted her back, but when he stepped toward her, she stepped back two paces and held up her arms as if that could stop him.

"I have to get back to work and giving you anything more is not in the deal," she said, patting her pocket where the bulge of money rested.

He conceded and allowed her to leave, which she did quickly. Getting back behind the booth, she shrieked as she saw Cleo standing by the bin of clothes. "What the hell are you doing here?" she exclaimed.

"Working. The front door was locked so I used my key. Are you okay?"

Nervously she looked at the female bathroom door and pulled Cleo deeper into the back. "I'm okay. I was just a little queasy. Is everything okay at home? I had you covered."

"Well, he's fine and his daddy miraculously came down to the hospital and said he would let me go while he watched the boy. He's got a temperature, but his daddy said he'd stay with him." She looked very grateful. "Thanks for saving my ass with Marv."

"How'd you know I didn't tell?"

"Cause you are here and not him. He'd gladly tell me to get the fuck out."

They walked back up to the front by the glass and both gasped at the figure.

"I must have left the door unlock," Cleo surmised. "Isn't that the guy who gave you trouble last time? Want me to handle him?"

His back was to them, and he was puffing on another cigarette slowly this time. Nicole knew why.

He's such a smug bastard, she sneered to herself, but she couldn't help smiling, knowing she'd done a good job pleasing him. "No, I can handle him." Going to the glass, she slid back in the seat, adjusting the wad in her pocket.

He turned, his smoky green eyes assessing her generously. His voice was strangely low, but wasn't a whisper. "When do you get off?" His hat was back on his head, but turned the opposite way, giving him a boyish look.

"That doesn't concern you."

"It does with my money in your pocket."

"Thirty minutes," she mumbled, not at all liking the cool exterior he now exhibited.

He walked out without another word.

Cleo hadn't heard any of the conversation, but she still said, "He wasn't that hard to please."

"If you only knew," Nicole mumbled under her breath, still feeling the strange soreness in her jaw and the tiredness in her lips. They had definitely been through a workout.

Nicole had too much on her mind about this time to even comment on Cleo or feel any pity for Cleo's son. "I got some food in the back. I'm going to go. I hope your son feels better."

"Me too and thanks kid."

They hugged, Nicole went to the back and rinsed out her mouth in the sink, and she left out. The green-eyed smug bastard pulled up on the side of her in a company white Ranger 4x4 with BLACK'S CEMENT on the passenger door. He opened the door for her. Without a word, she got in, figuring he must be pretty high up in the company to get a company car; probably a supervisor or something judging by the way his hands weren't that rough and by the managerial nature he carried.

"Don't you think we need to know each other's names before we go any further?" she asked as he got back in the driver's seat and took off in the direction of where he had met her. "I'm Nicole."

"That's it? Just Nicole?"

"I think some anonymity is good between us. That means once this is over with, we won't have any ties to each other."

"Are you saying you would like to stay impersonal?" He divided his attention between her and the road.

"Now it's your turn. What's your name?"

He hesitated, as if he didn't want to give it to her. "Ethan," he responded, turning a corner sharply. They experienced a strange silence until he asked, "Do you often do this to gentlemen willing to pay your exorbitant fees?"

She shrugged purposely to keep him wondering. If he wanted to think of her as a whore, it made it easier to take his money. "I should let you know your money will be put to good use. I'm going to be able to afford my last course for school and graduation. Thank you."

He pulled up to the spot where they met the first morning.

"Here is good enough; I don't live far," she said.

He turned out the lights and the motor before facing her, positioning himself so that his hand rested on the top back of her seat. Nicole wondered if breaking proximity boundaries was his way of keeping control of the situation.

"Personally, I don't care if you bathe yourself with the fucking loot; I just care when will it happen again?" The heat in his eyes made her feel warm all over and she looked straight to keep from succumbing to any emotional attachment to this man.

She couldn't understand why she felt perturbed one moment to total exhilaration the next. Lots of men had hit on her. Many had tried to molest her, but nevertheless, she had stayed away from any and all invitations, never wanting to involve her heart or her body with any man. So why was she sitting here now with a man she knew she could never keep forever and who only wanted her for her oral activity? Carefully forming her words as to not let him know how much he was affecting her, she said, "Tomorrow night after work. I can't see you any sooner."

His look of disappointment out of her peripheral vision was clearly evident. "Why is that?"

"I'm busy during the day and I can't miss work."

He agreed reluctantly. "Fine."

"Where do you live?" she blurted out, looking at him.

"I thought you wanted us to remain anonymous to each other?"

Nicole flushed. "I was just wondering-"

He cut her off. "I love your mouth."

Her breath caught her in her throat as her heart raced. She couldn't help but to meet his smoldering look of wanton lust with one of her own. Barely, she forced out, "Thank you," because she couldn't think of anything else to say that wouldn't let him know she had enjoyed his comment very much.

"Can I kiss you?"

She nodded and leaned forward. His other hand caught around her nape, tilting her head slightly to deepen the passion they shared.

The feel, touch, and taste of him turned her inside out and sent her senses on a wild roller coaster ride that she wanted never to stop.

Pushing away, reluctantly, she pressed her back against the passenger door.

The hungry look in his eyes clearly told her this man had serious locked up emotions and if unleashed, he could tear her heart apart. No emotional tie-ups. Not now! Not ever!

"Tomorrow," was all she whispered before jumping out there and running down to her home.

Marvin had his buddies over, but when she got in the house, she didn't pause to greet them or assess the situation. She continued on upstairs past Nanna's room to her small room in the attic, where she plopped on the twin size old bed and buried her hands in her face.

What the hell had she gotten herself into?

Chapter 4

Awakening in bed, Lynne looked at the empty pillow beside her and frowned. It wasn't like him to not call or come home. Picking up the cordless phone beside the bed, she dialed the office in Auburn Hills where James, her husband's brother, worked. Ethan stayed on the sites most of the time to stay away from his family, but used James' secretary, Kristen Marks, to keep up with his appointments.

Kristen answered the phone as polite as ever, although her tone went a little wayward when she realized exactly who was on the other line. "Good morning, Mrs. Black. James hasn't come in yet."

"I was wondering if you've heard from my husband?"

"Oh, now you're asking about your husband?" Kristen asked, sounding surprised. "Mr. Black left a message to reschedule all of his appointments for the next seven days to after the holidays, if possible." Her tone of voice was directly sarcastic, as if Lynne should already know this.

Lynne didn't exactly care for this little chit working for James, but she was a daughter of a friend of the family and James had said she did excellent work. "Would you know the reason behind this?"

Sighing impatiently, Kristen answered, "He's working on dual projects." Again, her tone was as if Lynne should have known this. "It may be taking up a lot of his time, especially since he needed special zoning with one of them."

Of course this didn't interest Lynne. Nothing of what her husband ever did interested the selfish woman, but she was always interested in James' schedule.

"Did he say where he can be contacted?" Lynne knew Ethan never slept on site.

"Only his cell phone after today."

Lynne huffed, annoyed, knowing the little minx was holding back information. Ever since Lynne had begun to show interest in James, Kristen seemed to be aloof and agitating to Lynne.

"Why after today, Kristen?"

Kristen's voice was matter-of-factly. "Because he sold the house in Detroit for one dollar. I drew up the papers myself for the lawyer."

Lynne gasped. "When? Why? To whom?"

"He said he didn't like its location anymore and that he wanted something bigger."

This wasn't like Ethan at all and alarm bells started going off in Lynne's gut. What the hell could he be up to?

"He sold it to Thaddeus Newman."

Lynne wanted to scream. She figured somehow that Thaddeus and his meddling wife, Skye, had been able to "educate" Ethan a little on the black woman. She'd noticed little techniques Ethan had begun using in questioning her on her whereabouts in the past year. If he knew about her male lovers, then he hadn't said a word. Yet, if he was so knowledgeable, why hadn't he said anything? He was a man who liked to get things out in the open, not sneak around. Yet, he sold the Detroit property and didn't tell her. He had always hated the city, so this wasn't out of the ordinary for him, just so unexpected of him. Ethan was anything but spontaneous. How dare he sell property without telling her so! "What about the furnishings I picked out, and my things?"

"The furnishings were included with the house and I was instructed to pack your things and put them in the storage location you usually use for your winter items. You should be receiving the information and specifics through UPS no later than noon today at your home address."

"So you went down to Detroit?"

"Yesterday morning, Mrs. Black," Kristen confirmed.

"Did you see him?"

"He let me in the house, but said he was late and needed to get across town before noon."

"And the other assignment he's involved in, where would that be?"

Kristen paused to look it up. "That would be on the west side of the city. As far as I know, he is using private resources to fund the project. But if I guess, I would say it had to be a residential property from the contractors he requested me to contact so he could use."

"He's paying for everything out of his pocket?" she asked incredulously.

"Yes, Mrs. Black, and if I may note, he seemed..." her voice faltered, as if unsure how to describe Ethan. "I'm not sure how to say this, but he seemed different."

"How is different?"

"Excited."

Lynne almost dropped the phone. Ethan Black didn't get excited about anything. "Are you sure about this?"

"Well, I'm not an expert on emotions, especially when it comes to Mr. Black, who usually never says two words to me. But he was so talkative, hurried, and flushed. It was so different. He almost reminded me of James."

That was different. The brothers were like night and day. James took nothing serious and Ethan took everything serious. He was agitated and huffed a lot, but looking excited about anything was just not in his nature.

"Thank you, Kristen," she said and hung up the phone, not even giving the girl any time to say anything else.

The door downstairs opened, then closed, and Lynne jumped out of the bed so fast she almost twisted her ankle getting down the stairs.

She located her husband in the kitchen making his own sandwich.

Even though he was clean shaven, Ethan looked haggard. His hair needed cutting and he wore work clothes and not the usual suits. This wasn't what caught her attention though. He hadn't noticed her yet and she was able to see the unguarded look of...happiness in his eyes.

She started to sweat, feeling nervous and caught. Did he know about the lovers? The many gifts she had bought for them with his money? The homes she had them living in with her husband's money? "Good morning, Ethan," she said lovingly.

He masked his expression immediately, giving her a wary look before biting into his sandwich.

Lynne stared at him, noticing the cocky way he stood as if he had conquered the world. "You didn't come home last night and you didn't call." She pretended to want to be in the kitchen and put the tea kettle on the stove, as if to make tea.

"I slept on site," he explained.

"You never sleep on site," she noted.

He only shrugged, not going into any more explanation than what he already had. "I was tired. I didn't feel like driving from Detroit. More or less, I passed out over some plans I've been working on."

Lynne busied herself by making coffee, knowing her husband was being evasive for other reasons.

He didn't speak, but took another bite.

"Kristen also tells me you've got a private project in the works."

He stiffened. "What else did she tell you?"

This was the Ethan she was used to with the familiar growl. Now she would be able to work her wiles on him. Moving slowly and seductively, each move made to draw the eye of any man, except her husband who only turned his back on her. With two more bites, he purposely hurried and finished the sandwich and used the opportunity to get him something to drink, pushing past her to get to the refrigerator.

Lynne didn't like being ignored and the man she had devoted her life to was doing just that. Matter of fact, this man had purposely gone out of his way to avoid her for the last three weeks. "What's going on, Ethan?"

"What do you mean?" he asked innocently.

"I mean you aren't doing things normally Ethan. This isn't like you and I don't like it."

He closed the refrigerator quietly and sat on the stools by the sink in the middle of the kitchen facing his wife. The water from the tea kettle chose this time to sound off on the stove, startling her frazzled nerves.

Slamming the pot on another eye, she faced him, waiting impatiently for an answer. She folded her arms across her chest and even tapped her foot.

He looked remotely amused as he surveyed his wife's upset condition. She was nothing like Nicole or should he say, Nicole was nothing like her mother. So was his plan for revenge against this trifling woman going to be worth it in the end, when he would have to break Nicole's heart? Just thinking about those beautiful brown eyes welling with tears over his betrayal turned an invisible screwdriver in his heart.

Ethan hardened his emotions to this. Keeping his eye on the goal he'd set for himself would make all this worthwhile. Then he could go on with his life, staying very far away from women in general. He realized that it didn't matter what color they were. All of them were nothing but a bunch of trouble, and now he knew why his father had died lonely and bitchy.

"I would like you to pack your things and get out. Before you leave, you'll place all the keys I've ever given you on this table. After all of that, you'll go to your lawyer, which I know you have and have him draw up divorce papers. You'll initialize the process because you will not get one red cent of anything I have."

She gripped the counter top so tight that her nails dug into the wood grain. Seething, she said through gritted teeth, "You can't do this to me. I'll ruin you financially you cold heartless asshole."

He reached in his back and pulled out a thick envelope. "You can try. You can try real hard, but you'll get only what you're worth--shit. If you go my way, I'll let you walk out of here with your dignity and personal

belongings. If you want to do it the hard way, I'll leave you in the middle of the city with nothing to your name and not a stitch on your body."

"I have places to stay," she said, slanting her eyes at him. "There are plenty of people I have."

"Like Carlos? Enrique? How about Stanley? Is that all of them or should I try the list of lover's in New York I've recently spoken to? Or maybe James, my own brother? Did you think I wouldn't know that one? And if you use that "trying to console him because of my father's death story" that he tried to use on me, I'll go fucking ballistic. You were fucking him way before my father passed away."

She wanted to scratch his eyes out. She wanted to take away that triumphant smirk on his face. What else did he know?

Standing up, Ethan said as cold as he could, "The houses, the credit cards, the cars, everything is gone. You're on your own. Even your lovers' homes you've so generously bought for them are gone. I've confiscated all the gifts you've bought them. Yes, I have been keeping track of all the cars and jewelry gifts you've gone out of your way to keep from me."

She turned her back to him so angry. "How long have you known?"

"The past two years, but I thought I could handle it. I mean, I was just in lust with you. I thought you would make me love you. I could have given time, but you used me, just like you have used everyone else in your life. Even that bastard you had and tried to hide from the world by fostering her off on your own mother."

She gasped and turned to look at him. "You knew about her?"

"Does she know you tried to use her, too? That her supposed daddy wouldn't give a whore the time of day, so you tried to abort her and when she wouldn't just disappear, you gave her up to your mother? Does she know even after she was born that you still tried to get money out of a man who wasn't even her daddy?"

Lynne came around the counter. "Why should I tell a brat who gave me nothing but pain about a worthless man, who didn't mean shit to me but a good fuck? I could have had a real man who loved me and I loved him."

"He only wanted a good fuck and that you are, Lynne. You only wanted him for the money."

Trying her best vindictive tone, she said, "You wouldn't know about love, you unfeeling bastard."

"And you did at thirteen with a fifty-year-old man? You were a whore then and you're a whore now."

Instead of hitting him, she grabbed the hot pot and hurled it at him. But he ducked to avoid it, letting it slam against the kitchen wall behind him. "Is that all you have to say?"

"No, I got a lot more. You will never have anyone who will fuck you as good as me. You will never know love, because your idea of it is a five-hour marathon of you sweating and pumping like a damn rocking horse. Men like you will always grow old, lonely and bitchy because you have no idea how to please a woman, just like your father. Take your shit, because I can find a real man to satisfy my needs."

"Before you go finding a real man, why don't you go be a real mother to that little bastard you left." He stormed out the kitchen, fighting his willpower not to throttle that bitch for her hurting words. He'd started the mess and should feel damn good. He had ended the whole thing, but he knew he had just started some more mess with Nicole that would kill her mother emotionally. Now all he had to do was get the bastard to fall in love with him.

Nicole was putting up a good fight, but he knew she wanted him. Holding back only spurred him to make her want him more. Was it race? Or was it age? How could he break her down to do what he wanted her to do.

He was only thirty-three to her nineteen. Yes that was a bit of a challenge, but he was positive any young woman her age would be enamored by the attention of a rich older man, no matter what color he may be. Lighting up a cigarette to calm his nerves, he thought long and hard about his decision to deceive her. Hell, she was a whore just like her mother, except she was a little smarter and honest and asked for the money up front.

"No emotional ties," were her exact words. This clearly told him she wasn't interested in any relationship, but she wanted something. Every woman wanted something. He just had to find out what this particularly intelligent, young beautiful woman wanted, and then give it to her.

At any and all cost, he planned to hurt Nicole Gray just to make sure his wife, Lynne Gray, knew she had fucked over the wrong man.

Chapter 5

The doctor checked her one last time and then pulled Nicole outside the room so Nanna could get some rest. Doctor Vincent Rucker was a kind man, who reminded her of Roger Moore when he played in those Bond movies, except he was missing the British accent. "She's getting enough rest," he assured her. "I don't want her moving at all. Not until we can find out for certain if there will be a heart donor before the end of the year."

"And if there is not one?" she asked worriedly.

He looked at her gravely. "I would like her to come to the hospital and stay. She will be even weaker and I don't want her in this environment. I would also like you to speak with her about resuscitation. She is still coherent enough to discuss her options."

Stubbornly, her chin went up. "There are no options. You will resuscitate her if she goes into arrest."

"I can't just do it because you said so." He handed her an envelope. "Give this to her. Read it over for her and then have her initial what she wants and sign at the bottom."

Tears welled up tight in her eyes at the thought of losing Nanna. "I don't think I can, Dr. Rucker."

"I know you can be strong, Nicole. I know you can," he assured her, giving her a comforting hug.

After he left, she went back in the room where Nanna rested quietly. The lighting was low and soft music played in the background. Nanna loved the symphony *Phantom of the Opera* and the music played morning, noon and night, comforting the old woman in her time of need. All last month, it had been the songs of Shirley Caesar. If Nanna made it to the New Year, Nicole was very interested in what the old woman would pick.

When she sat down beside Nanna in a chair, the old brown eyes opened. Her skin was pale from lack of blood flow. Already, the elderly woman had lost one of her legs to the knee from lack of blood flow.

Watching the woman, who had been more of a parent to her than anyone, dying was heart wrenching. Nanna had been the strong independent woman Nicole had told herself she would grow up to be.

A faint, weak smile crossed Nanna's features as she forced herself to awake. "How's my Nicole?" she asked, her deep southern drawl coming forward slowly. The stroke had slowed her speech drastically until it sounded as if she spoke in slow motion.

Nicole wiped her eyes again from the fresh stream of tears. "I'll be fine, and you?"

"Sometimes I feel bad, sometimes I feel nothing." She paused to catch her breath. "I don't mind the badness. It's the nothing that scares me."

She covered her mouth to hold back a sob. Nanna's eyes went to the papers in Nicole's hands and without being asked to explain, she said, "Dr. Rucker gave me these papers. They're about you choosing to be revived if...your heart should fail. I told him I could make the decision for you."

"Can you Nicki? Can you really?"

Nicole began to weep earnestly. "I don't want you to leave me. I don't want to be without you, Nanna." She fell to her knees and gently laid her head on her grandmother's bosom. "Please Nanna, say you'll stay. Stay as long as you can. As long as they can keep you here, please. I can't lose you."

"Nanna's tired baby." Weakly, Nanna patted Nicole's shoulder, offering her as much comfort as she could. "Look at me child."

Nicole looked up at the eyes just like her, but tired and old, yet filled with so much unconditional love. The pain of losing these feelings made Nicole's chest hurt.

"I've been talking to my Jesus and it's time for me to join Him, child. But I got a lot to say to you, so hush now."

Forcing her sobs to dissipate, she moved back in the chair, but moved it closer to the bed. Nanna requested some air and Nicole turned on her oxygen that ran up into her nose. Nanna had requested to go home instead of staying at the hospital because she didn't like being away from the home she had married in and raised her family in. There were home nurses that visited daily, and there was an emergency alert button, if ever they needed to rush her to the hospital, not far from where they lived.

"I've lived a long time," the old woman said after taking several deep breaths. "I've loved many, but your grandfather was a man I will love forever. He's waiting for me and I can't wait to see him." Between each sentence, she took long deep breaths. "When it's time, let me go, child. Let me go home to my husband, my daughter, and most of all, my Lord. I know it will be rough, but you won't be alone, Nicole. This body I'm in now can't take another year on this earth and I can't protect you like I want to. When I get my new body, me and the Lord will watch over you. We'll make sure you are safe. Understand?"

Nicole nodded. Opening the papers, she filled out the appropriate information for Nanna, then put the pen in her grandmother's hands and put the document where Nanna could sign and date the appropriate lines. Nicole would respect her Nanna's wishes no matter what.

When Nanna finished, she ordered Nicole to place the document in the secret compartment in the wall Nanna had built before Marvin had first moved in, which contained all of Nanna's private documentation. No one knew of it except Nicole. Nanna hadn't even told that shady lawyer Lynne had supplied for free to Nanna for any legal help.

"You'll make peace with your mother, Nicole," Nanna said quietly as Nicole came to sit back down.

She stiffened. "She's not my mother."

"When my Ecole left for those smart schools when she was twelve, I prayed to the Lord to send me someone who would take the place of her here in my heart. I tried so hard to raise Lynne, but everything anyone said to her, she did the opposite. Drove your grandfather to an early grave with the stress she put on him. Lynne was rushed to the hospital because of a failed abortion attempt. I ordered her to have the baby and I have never regretted that decision. When you were born and I looked into the same eyes as mine, I knew the Lord was giving me another chance at having a daughter in my life. You got Ecole's brains and my spirit. That's all you need in this life to make it past the bad elements. Yes, she is your mother because it takes anyone to be a mother or father, but it takes real women and men to be mommas and daddies."

Nanna always had a way of making things that troubled Nicole makes sense. She was always in tune with Nicole's emotional health.

"Where is Marvin?" Nanna asked.

"He's at the Laundromat; he'll be home soon so I can go there for the night shift. A new nurse will be coming to stay by your side."

"When I go home to my Lord, Lewis Kraus will be visited by Armando Bellini, Esquire. Mr. Bellini will deliver several letters to certain persona and you. At this time, Mr. Bellini will read my last will and testament I drew up the day before my last stroke." Deep pain came to Nanna's face and Nicole wasn't sure if it was present or past pain.

The day Nanna had her last stroke, Nicole had been at the Laundromat and Marvin had been at home with Nanna at the time. Nicole suspected Marvin of foul play, but it could never be proved.

"After this, you will go to Parker Mills of Advance Laundry Service and work on paying back money he advanced to Marvin for the sale of the Laundromat. This amount I am not sure of."

Nicole gasped. "How do you know this?" she asked.

"Just because Nanna is bedridden child, don't mean she's out of touch. People don't know these walls have ears and I've been in it too long not to know what it's saying." Nanna held out her hand toward Nicole, and Nicole grasped it with her own tightly for support. "Which is why I can't understand you, Nicole."

"Me? There's nothing wrong."

"A woman who sleeps so restless lately through the night means she's got a lot on her mind and heart. Who is he?"

Nicole blushed so hard she thought her cheeks would catch on fire. "He's no one."

"But you'll tell me all about him tomorrow; child. Now let this old woman get some rest."

She kissed her grandmother's cheek tenderly. "I love you Nanna."

"And I you, Nicole," she whispered before drifting off to sleep.

Nicole quietly left out the room and sighed to herself. Were her emotions that evident? No, Nanna was always tuned into Nicole and always knew what bothered her.

The doorbell rang to bring her out of her musings. Upon opening the door, she stood in shock at the site of Lynne standing in the doorway.

"Are you going to stand there looking stupid or are you going to let me in?" she snapped at Nicole's stuck-on-stupid look.

Nicole moved out the way to let her in. This was about the first thing this woman had said to her in her whole life. When she was little, she was ignored or sent to her room. For the past three years, Marvin would just send her to the store for cigarettes every Tuesday morning--except today wasn't Tuesday.

Seizing her up, Nicole noted the shortness and skinniness while Nicole had more curves. "Nanna's sleeping."

"I'm not here to see her."

"Marvin's at the Laundromat."

Lynne only ignored her and looked around her in disgust.

A knock on the screen brought a new face. She opened the door to the smiling taxi cab driver. He set down a seven-piece Gucci luggage set in front of her, tipped his hat, then jumped back in the cab and drove away.

"Moving?" Nicole asked Lynne, now understanding her mother's reasons for being there.

"Don't worry, I won't be here for long, you worthless brat," Lynne sneered.

Nicole bit her lip before saying, "I thought you were talking about yourself." Instead she said stiffly, "Your bedroom's still in back." She closed the door and walked up the stairs to her small attic room without another word to the horrible woman. Mother or not, she would not take another unkind word from her.

When the nurse came, she spoke with her quietly over Nanna's new medication then left, leaving Lynne to her own means.

Chapter 6

Some kid came in at eight asking for her. Nicole was there alone and looked at him suspiciously. His dark chocolate eyes were the same as his skin, with matching hair. He was wearing a dirty brown winter jacket with a runny nose.

He asked again impatiently, "Can I speak to Nicole?"

"I'm Nicole," she acknowledged.

It was his turn to look at her suspiciously. "You don't look like a Nicole."

"And who do I look like?"

He shrugged. "I thought you'd be white."

"Why?"

"Because some white guy two blocks over paid me five bucks to deliver a little piece of paper."

"What paper?" she asked suppressing her excitement, knowing who the "white guy" was.

The little boy dug deep in his jacket pocket, pulling out old candy wrappers, crumbs, broken cookies, and finally a neatly folded piece of lavender paper. "Are you sure you're Nicole?" he asked again.

Exasperated, she insisted, "Yes."

"Prove it."

"He's got gorgeous green eyes."

"What's gorgeous mean?"

Nicole rolled her eyes heavenward. "They're real pretty green."

He smiled and put the paper in the money slot.

Can you get off an hour early and meet me out back? Please respond below and return with kid. Reward for a positive response to kid. Ethan

His writing was very neat and she almost wanted to treasure the enriched paper. It didn't feel cheap and it smelled like him. Reluctantly, she had to write on it, "YES."

Looking at the boy who patiently waited, she said, "Am I supposed to tell you something?"

He nodded. "He said you're supposed to write yes or no on the paper."

She smiled, handing the boy the piece of paper. "I told him yes."

Taking the paper, the little boy beamed and ran outside. In a moment, he was back hiding something behind his back. "Close your eyes," he ordered. "Push out the big tray."

She obeyed until he told her to open it, gasping at the beautiful white rose in a floral box with baby's breath. There was a card attached with his writing on it. She opened the laundry slot hurriedly and pulled the card off, reading it: "THANK YOU."

Warily, she looked at the boy. "What if I had said no?"

"He said if you said no to just leave and take this to my Momma."

"What's your name?"

"David."

"How far is two blocks over?"

"Down near the school over there. He's been working on two houses at the same time. He said he bought them. One house he tore down and he's building this thick wooden big fence around both the properties."

"Thank you, David." She put the paper in the money slot and he grabbed it. After sticking it deep in his pocket again, he waved and left.

She opened the floral box and smelled the rose. Did he know how expensive roses were this time of year? Of course he did because he paid for it.

She carried the box inside the booth, as if it were a newborn baby. Her thoughts were totally centered on him until Cleo came in at ten.

"I'm not feeling well so I'm going to leave early," she told her. Cleo accepted this as a legitimate excuse. But she then added, "If anyone calls me, I'm busy."

Cleo smiled knowingly, "With whom, may I ask?"

"I just want to check something out, okay?"

Cleo only nodded with a wicked smile. "Leave as early as you want. If you want to leave earlier, just call me in."

Nicole only huffed and hurried to finish several orders. With the holiday season, there were a lot of orders to complete. Nicole liked to keep the regular customers happy by getting their orders done early, so she was kept very busy physically and mentally.

At eleven thirty, she checked out of the peephole at the back door. Usually, she got out at one, but wasn't sure if he understood that. No one was there, so she finished pressing one more load. Twenty minutes later, she checked again. A black van was sitting there quietly and she hoped it was him.

Grabbing her bag, she told Cleo, who was on the floor sweeping around the machines, she was gone and rushed out of the back door. Opening the van door, she almost smiled seeing Ethan inside. Soon as she was seated, he took off, but he didn't head in the direction of her home.

"Where are we going?" she inquired.

That would ruin the surprise, wouldn't it?" he asked.

"What surprise?"

He shrugged. "It's a quiet space I just found out about close by. I just assumed you wouldn't be able to entertain me at your job properly without others knowing."

This tone of voice made her feel as if she were ashamed of him. "I'm only putting up with you because of the money," she indicated.

He nodded. "I'm aware of that."

As nonchalant as she could muster, she said, "And once my service is done tonight, I want nothing to do with you."

"Which is why I am making it easier on you by remaining anonymous. I know it wouldn't look good for you to be seen with a white man." These words were said with a lot of frustration and she had a feeling this didn't have anything to do with her. Yet, she didn't want him to think she was ashamed of his color; it was just that if Marvin or even her mother knew, or even suspected her involvement with any man, she would be in trouble. She still remembered the horrible beating she had gotten in the tenth grade when she allowed some boy to just walk her home, and someone had told Marvin. He had waited until Nanna had gone shopping the following day and beat Nicole with a thick cover over her so there wouldn't be any marks left. She was sore for days. Her uncle had made it clear that there would be no dallying for her with anyone.

So why was she taking a chance now with this man? That question remained to be unanswered for her. "I appreciate your thoughtfulness," she said, with her tone filled with sarcasm. "Am I going to catch something?" she asked.

He frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I'm sure you were there last night and notice ...how shall I say it...there wasn't a mess to clean up. I want to know how clean you are."

"Very," he answered. "A couple of months ago, I took a blood test. I'm clean," he assured her. "And you?"

"Virginal," she said honestly, but in a teasing way. "You could eat off of me."

He chuckled, which she knew he would since he thought of her as a whore. Knowing that his mindset was the same assured her emotional state of mind. As long as he thought of her like that, no deeper emotions could possibly come forth from her.

She would honestly admit when he wasn't being an ass, she was highly attracted to him.

He put the car in Park and turned toward her. "We're here."

She looked out to see a small city park. He cut the motor and light off quickly to not attract any attention. "A park?"

"I figured somewhere we won't be distracted." He reached down and unlocked his seat, pushing it back to give him more room between the steering wheel and him.

"I guess whores can't be choosy."

"If you could, where would you imagine being?"

Nicole thought about something kinky. "I'd like to have you lying on a bed with your arms tied up while I touched you all over." She turned around in her chair and took both his hands in hers and held them up. "You'd be mine to command all night long to drive you crazy."

He leaned his head forward to kiss her, but she moved away teasingly. "You enjoy driving me crazy?"

"Do I?" she asked, releasing his hands and moving down to her knees looking up at him.

His hands cupped her cheeks. The seriousness in his eyes alerted her senses to prepare to go on a tizzy. "You do, Nicole."

"*Just get it over with!*" she told herself, and she started to unbutton his pants. "I should get started."

Concentrating, she focused her thoughts to the duty at hand: pleasing him with her mouth.

She opened the belt and opened the dark green corduroy pants. He assisted her by removing his sheepskin jacket and opening the matching green corduroy shirt to reveal a white t-shirt underneath.

"Do I need to remove anything else?" he asked teasingly.

"Would you be more comfortable?" she asked.

"You talk as if you've never done this before," he said, chuckling huskily.

Nicole really wanted to confess; she hadn't just to get that amused expression off his face. She bit her lip hard because she couldn't reveal that to him. If he knew how really innocent she was, things would be so much different between them.

When she finished unzipping his pants, he raised up slightly, allowing her to pull his pants down past his knees to his ankle. Along with getting his pants off, she tugged down the green silk boxer shorts as well.

Taking a slow deep breath, she moved her hands around the semi-hardened shaft. Light from the street nearby filtered in to illuminate the thickness of him. Last night, she had not paid any attention visually because she wanted to get things over with and concentrate on Cleo's instructions. Now her eyes noted every dim detail as her fingers caressed every inch of his groin.

So engaged in her fondling, she didn't realize she wasn't concentrating on things Cleo had told her to do. In no way did she even want to look like innocence with him. Quickly looking up at him, she saw his eyes closed, his head thrown back, his lips parted, and his breathing rasped, enjoying what she was doing to him.

This spurred her on. Her eyes returned to the now engorged manhood. Both her hands could clasp around him with the thumbs barely making connections with the fingers and her palms, leaving about four inches still at the top screaming to be touched. The throbbing shaft pulsed and began to grow with life in her fingers.

"Do you enjoy doing this to men?" he asked.

"Doing what?" she asked innocently.

"Pleasing men orally?"

Her thumb brushed the tip, spreading the pre-love juice around. His body shuddered as the sensitive nerve endings on the top tingled every vein in his body.

"And if I told you I just enjoyed pleasing you, would you believe me?"

The seriousness in his face returned as he looked down at her, making her see a whole different man. If he actually believed her, she was positive he would do everything in his power to give her the world.

This terrified her. To have a man's heart - this man's heart - could be what she needed. But he was older *and* white. She would be just like her mother, and that's one person she didn't want to be like.

"No," he said.

She only shrugged nonchalantly, but inside, she was glad he hadn't. Nicole would have to stop letting her personal feelings come into play with him. To convince him of the truth would be insane.

Her hands parted his thighs, nudging them apart until she could easily move her hand in between his legs. Her hand moved down to the velvety orbs, cupping them gently. He tensed sharply, sucking in air between his teeth. Her mouth was quick to follow her hands and drew him deep into her mouth.

Her fingers explored below the orbs to the space in between and pressed the perineum, remembering the sensitive spot Cleo told her would make a man go crazy. At the same time, Nicole enveloped the engorged bar.

Hearing his groans pleased her. Cleo told her to pay attention to a man's body, breathing and voice. His sighs of pleasure and enjoyment were encouraging and educational in giving her instructions on how he wanted to be pleased. She moved upward, placing long wet kisses from the base to the tip of the tumultuous manhood. Soft succulent kisses tasted the first drops of sweetness at the tip of him.

Going to the peak, she circled around the edge slowly, leaving a wet trail to fuel her path; applying pressure in the dimple, tasting his masculinity. Using one hand to grip the base of him, she guided him slowly into her mouth, taking him inch by inch until he rested on the back of her tongue. All the while, she moved her oral muscle from side to side and applied slow powerful suction and increased the pressure on his secret love spot below the orbs in a circular motion. When she increased the movement with her mouth, she also increased the movement with her fingers below. His moans encouraged her and the tightness in the orbs told her he was close to giving himself to her. She sped up her motions, until he began to grow so much that she was not able to take him in all the way as she had been in the beginning. She used her other hand to stroke the space she was not able to account for with her lips.

His muscles were tensed until they vibrated, and the explosion in her orifice came at the same time as he cried out her name over and over again. Letting the warm liquid flow down her throat seemed easier than yesterday. She even realized the swallowing sensation brought him an afterglow of pleasure.

This was the end of her service for him, she knew, yet still her mouth continued to envelope the shaft until every last drop of him was down her throat. Slowly, she moved her mouth away from him, but gave him a long kiss at the tip, as if to say, "Goodbye." The movement was tender and priceless for both of them and she blushed as she looked up into his intense eyes that were looking down at her.

His strong hands grasped her shoulders and he pulled her up into his arms. She licked her lips before biting down on them nervously, hoping he hadn't caught her intimate kiss. Before she could say anything to explain her actions, he kissed her deeply and she responded just as eagerly. He pulled her closer in his arms and she crawled into his lap, resting her legs on the seat beside his thighs. Unconsciously, her hips grinded against his groin, rubbing her heat against him while his mouth praised her eyelids, nose, and cheeks.

"I want more," he whispered huskily with his lips near her ear.

The tingles filling her own veins were driving her insane. She fought through the haze, filling her brain to hear his words. "What do you mean?" she asked.

"I want more of you."

She was confused and afraid to ask what he meant. Would Cleo know what he meant? Of course she would; Cleo knew everything. Yet, if Nicole really thought about it, giving him even more meant giving herself and that she could not give. "Oh no, that could never happen. I can't let that happen," she answered breathlessly, gripping his shoulders to fight the wantonness she was feeling.

He stiffened, uncomfortably leaning back. His hands moved to her hips to stop her erotic grinding against him and she whimpered her protest, but allowed him to hold her back as he was doing. He used his hand to hold her chin so she would look at him. "What do you mean that can never happen?" His tone and look was bothered.

She wanted to continue her motions, but he held her firmly from moving her body against his. Biting her lip again, she cursed to herself for revealing so much. When she became hesitant about answering him, his look became bothered.

"Nicole, what do you mean by I can't ever?"

She sighed, knowing what they had just shared and the arousal she was feeling would be going nowhere soon. He was too serious by far and took everything so literal. Couldn't he just enjoy the moment? Couldn't he be just satisfied with the here-and-now instead of thinking about the future? Pushing out of his waist, she sat back in her chair, avoiding that intense glare she knew he was giving her. He was ready for a fight and she didn't want to give it to him, but she needed to make him understand without telling him the entire truth.

"Like I said yesterday, after my service, we have no strings attached."

"I don't want any strings," he gritted out, straightening up his clothes angrily. "I want you."

"You can't have me."

He sneered, "Is it my color?"

She had a feeling this man had had problems in the past with other women rejecting him because of his color, but that had nothing to do with it. Even if he was black, Marvin would be the color of her knowing she was involved with anyone. "That's not it. It's not you, Ethan," she implored.

"Is it our age difference?"

"I don't even know how old you are. It's not you at all, Ethan. It's me. Please just understand I can't."

His eyes narrowed. "You want more money."

"No," she said firmly. "I just needed the money you first gave me to pay off my education and now that that's done, I don't need anything else from you. I don't want anything else from you. I have too many obligations. I have too many responsibilities."

He looked desperately into her face, wanting to believe she was as honest about things as she said. But all he could think about was Lynne and Nicole looked like her mother, although Nicole was much more. Nicole's inside beauty came to the surface, almost making him forget this was his present wife's daughter.

The deceitfulness of the mother had not washed off on the girl, had it? He couldn't be sure. Maybe this almost innocent ploy was to get more money or maybe more. Maybe she was using him to get away from the horrible conditions she lived in and once she was away, she would drop him like a bad habit.

Ethan cupped her face with her hands and looked deeply in her eyes, not sure what to believe, not sure what to do. He just knew he needed to convince her to be with him so he could get this all over with. The sooner he took her and threw this in Lynne's face, the sooner he could get away from them all. His lie came easily to his lips

as he told her, "I've never wanted anyone as much as I've wanted you. Please Nicole, just one night, and I will give you the world. Anything you ask for, I would give to be with you for one night."

Just as she was about to protest again, he placed a finger over her lips to stop her.

"I'll give you three days to think about it. To plan, to make time to be with me because I know you want this as much as I want it."

"I don't want any ties to you. You don't understand me."

"All I understand is that you want me; even for one night." His lips brushed teasingly against hers. "I can feel your need, I can smell your lust, and I can taste your passion." This time when he pulled her in to kiss her, his tongue explored her mouth to the fullest, driving her senses insane. "Three days," he whispered, leaving her breathless.

Nicole whimpered, "Alright, three days," she agreed.

He released her and turned around to start up the vehicle. They drove in tense silence to where they had first met. He occasionally glanced at her to see her in deep thought, biting her lip.

When they arrived at their destination, she took a deep breath as he turned off the motor. "I want you to know, I take care of my sick grandmother when I am not at work. She means a lot to me and I can't imagine a world without her, but she's dying because her heart is weak. I told you all of this because if after three days I refuse, I don't want you to think it's because of you, or age, or your color. Choosing between her health status and you wouldn't be hard. I'd choose her. But it'd be the only reason I'd say no."

He nodded and watched her get out the van. He followed suit as she came around to his side and stood to look up at him.

"Goodbye Ethan," she said.

He drew her in his arms, intending to kiss her so deeply that she wouldn't resist him. Her response was immediate and she equaled his passion, drawing his own senses into the kiss. They were oblivious to their surroundings as he moved her around until her back was pressed against the van's door and he was pinning her body to his waist. She felt light as a feather as he lifted her and drew her legs around his waist. With one hand, he held her up there securely as his other hand moved under her shirt, making a direct path to the soft mound of her breast. She moaned as he cupped the fullness in his hand and moved his thumb against the tip. She was senseless and completely under his control, wanting so much more.

A flash of light coming around the corner startled them both and they quickly drew away from each other. The taxi passed them without stopping, but they both knew things had gotten way out of control for both of them.

When he reached to touch her again, she moved quickly away and stood arms length from him to regain her equilibrium. "I am going. I'll see you in three days, Ethan."

He watched as she ran away into the darkness. He ran a frustrated hand through his hair. He wanted to pound his head against the door and curse for losing his cool. Who was in control of what he did not know? On one hand, she was driving him crazy with her sexuality and he was tearing her apart with his wantonness for her. There was no doubt in his mind she wanted him, but as she said, there was too much responsibility on her hands to involve herself.

He'd heard the rumors in the nearby bars that Marvin was tough and lots of guys talked about trying to get in her pants. One man even spoke about hearing Marvin say he planned on getting in those panties first. The way the neighborhood guys spoke about her, one would think this girl was a virgin. But the way she acted to him was definitely a different story. He refused to believe an almost-twenty, beautiful smart girl like that would allow her uncle by marriage to have so much control over her life, especially now that she was not even a minor. Yet, the men at the bar and guys who had gone to school with her rattled on about stories of Marvin threatening to cut off family jewels if he found out anyone of them had touched his niece.

When Ethan had seen them interact in the Laundromat before he made his presence known to her, Marvin had been very rough on her. Once he had even dragged her in the back and a lot of screaming and hollering from the both of them had ensued. When Marvin had left from there, she hadn't come back up to the window for a couple of hours and even then, he saw redness on her face.

So Marvin probably slapped her around a couple of times. She didn't seem as if she couldn't handle her uncle. If she didn't want to be there, why didn't she leave? Was Nanna that important to her than her own life?

Had making her choose between spending time with him and being beside Nanna been wrong on his part? Ethan had to wonder. It didn't matter. His main objective was to destroy his wife, well his ex-wife, if he got his way in a month. His lawyers could have the whole thing settled by then and Lynne would be out of his life and

destroyed. She would not only be destroyed financially because she would have to pay for the cost of the proceedings, but she would also be destroyed mentally knowing Ethan had seduced her daughter.

If Nicole was innocent, it would be all the sweeter.

Chapter 7

As soon as she closed the door to her home, a hard pain came to the back of her head, sending her sprawling to the floor. Turning over and blinking to catch the dizzying room, Marvin stood over her with his fist bawled up. Lynne was holding him back, ordering him to give Nicole time to explain herself.

"What?" Nicole asked innocently.

"Where the fuck were you?" he bellowed.

Her heart raced as she tried to get up, but the room was still spinning. "I was at work."

He kicked her in the thigh with his steel toe boots. "You fucking liar." He pushed Lynne away and grabbed Nicole by her hair to drag her in the kitchen. Nicole screamed and held on his arm to decrease the pain in her head. He practically tossed her against the kitchen wall, and then before she could pull herself up, he grabbed her collar and swung her around until she was thrown over the kitchen table and landed on the floor. He came around the table and pinned her down.

Nicole tried to block the blows to her face and chest, but the several that got through hurt so bad that she almost gave up in her effort to protect herself.

Lynne shoved him away, screaming at him to stop. "You're going to kill her asshole!"

Marvin angrily backhanded her to silence. "If you think she's going to go around and be a fucking tramp like her Mamma, then she's got another thing coming. I'll fucking kill her and you if I catch any man between her legs."

"So you can fuck her for yourself," Lynne sneered. "I wouldn't put it past you Marvin since you fucked your sister."

Marvin raised his fist to slap her again, but Lynne took a glass bowl and knocked him over his head. He fell to the ground out cold.

Nicole crawled to a corner, still trying to protect herself, as Lynne walked over to her and just stared down at her. "I'm surprised he hasn't raped you already," she sneered and walked out of the house, grabbing Marvin's keys off the dining room table.

###

Awakening the next morning in her bed, Nicole groaned in pain as she sat up, feeling the muscles in her body scream at being moved. She tried the door to her room, but the door was locked. Covering her swollen face with her swollen hands, she sobbed in frustration, wondering if and when he would let her out. Once he did, where would she go? Who could she run to? No one cared.

What about Nanna? Looking about the room, she saw a first aid kit, some cat food and a bucket.

Moving back to the bed, she covered herself up and cried even more.

###

After three days, he went to the Laundromat confident she would give him a positive response. He'd brought a load of clothes to throw everyone off, but when he saw a different girl up at the window with Cleo, he left. Had Nicole exchanged shifts with someone to avoid him?

When a week passed and she didn't show up for work, he staked out the house. His lawyer informed him that Lynne's lawyer wanted to meet for negotiations at the end of the second week. That time came very slow and he was at his wits end. As far as he knew from questioning the nurses that went in and out of the house, no one had seen Nicole.

Entering Bynum and Bernstein Law Office, followed by Lorenzo, Ethan's lawyer out of Chicago, he wanted to grab Lynne by her neck and demand she tell him where Nicole was. But when he saw Lynne, she looked aloof and stressed herself. Obviously Mr. Bynum, her lawyer, had informed her that whatever assets of hers would be used to pay the proceedings and she knew there was nothing she could do. The sooner she got the proceedings over with, the less money she would have to pay. She had demanded the proceedings be over with as soon as possible.

When the tremors of the divorce came up and the court-appointed negotiator asked Lynne did she have any objections to not taking anything from Ethan, Lynne looked at Ethan long and hard, then shook her head.

"I don't want anything."

"What a surprise," he sneered.

She narrowed her eyes, knowing he was aiming for a verbal fight. "I won't give you what you want, Ethan. The sooner you're out the picture, the sooner I can get on with my life. I've got prospects and you are just in my way."

"Was your daughter in your way too? Is that why you got rid of her."

Lynne stood up and started to leave. He jumped up and moved around to block her path. "Get out of my way, Ethan. What I do with my child is none of your business!"

"It is when she disappears in thin air. Did you kill her, Lynne? Was she that much in your way to get your hands on your mother's money?"

Lynne slapped him with rage running through every fiber of her being. But that didn't daunt his cold expression, nor did it stop his hand from going around her neck and holding her tightly. Lorenzo jumped from his seat and moved to stop Ethan.

"Whatever she's done is not worth it. We'll get the law involved, Ethan. But hurting her will not be worth it."

Ethan held on for one more moment, then released her and walked out the room, knowing Renaldo would handle the proceedings from here on with his client's best interest in mind. He knew if he spent another moment in that room with that bitch, he would kill her.

###

The next afternoon as he was staking out Nanna's home, he saw the long brown coat come out the door. He nearly dropped his coffee trying to sit up from his crouched down position. Pulling the car into Drive, he followed the figure all the way to the Laundromat, and then drove to his site to look for David, who lived across the street from the site he was working on. He had to wait until the boy got out of school before he could talk to him. Then his mother made him wait an extra hour after that before David could come outside in the cold weather.

He sent David around to the Laundromat, instructing him to give a message to Nicole. If she wasn't there, he instructed him not to reveal who sent him and to just leave. David came back after half an hour, looking a bit shook up.

"What happened?"

"She wasn't there and a mean old lady, who looked like her, said she's gone to school away from home. She asked me who sent me and I lied and said my daddy wanted to know about some clothes he dropped off. But it was like she knew I was lying and she tried to grab me, but I ran out." David gave him the ten dollars back. "I don't want to go around there no more until she comes back, mister."

"When will you know if she comes back?"

"My sister works at the corner store near there. I could tell her to look in for her."

"Thanks David."

Ethan decided to go next door and knock on Cleo's door. One of his foremen told him that he had talked to the older woman about the noise early in the morning, and Ethan didn't mind adjusting the workman's schedule so she could get some sleep.

Cleo looked very wary when she opened the door to him, but left her security door closed. "Don't I know you?" she asked.

"I use the Laundromat up the street. I wanted to ask you about Nicole."

"There's nothing to ask." She started to close the door. "She don't get involved with customers."

"Please," he beseeched.

The tone of his voice made her stop. "What do you want?"

"I want to know where she is."

"The owner said she's staying at the hospital with her grandmother as far as I know."

The cold bit at his ears. He only put on his sheepskin to speak to David and it was freezing cold outside. "That's not true. I know it's not true, but I can't explain how I know. Can I come in, because I think she might be in trouble?"

Cleo looked worried, and then confused. Finally, she unlocked the security door and let him in. He put out the cigarette he'd been smoking and came in. The home was clean, but it had that familiar poverty smell. She offered him a seat on the couch, and he welcomed it. He knew not to refuse any generosity because she would think it as an insult.

"When she didn't come in a couple of weeks ago and Marvin started working her shift, I got a little suspicious. But he told me to shut my mouth. Well, one of the customers didn't like how his orders were always late, so he demanded to know where she was. I happened to be there early trying to help with the Christmas orders, and Marvin told him that Nanna got rushed to the hospital and Nicole was doing some vigil by her side. This sounded like Nicki because I know her grandmother means everything to her."

"I know that's not true because I've been watching for her. Nanna's still in the house on bed rest. I spoke to one of the nurses just the other day. They say she's getting worse, but there hasn't been any sign of Nicole. Do you think she might have run away?"

Cleo shook her head. "She wouldn't leave Nanna. I don't care how bad Marvin beats her."

"He beats her?"

"Hell yeah, but nothing lately. The last time he hit her was when she demanded to know why there was so much money missing from the accounts. He dragged her in the back and slapped her around a couple of times. But that was about a month or so ago. She told me about it. As far as I know, he only hits her when she stands up for herself, or when she does something he doesn't like."

"Could this be one of those times? Could he have hit her and hurt her?"

"Maybe, but...he'd never kill her. I think Marvin likes her a lot. I've seen how he looks at her sometimes. That's why he made me work nights 'cause I made a comment one time that if he kept looking at her that way, he might as well fuck her. But, I was just teasing. He got so pissed at me though, and that's when he started looking for reasons to fire me."

The thought of the uncle wanting to do something like that to his niece repulsed him, yet maybe Marvin could have done so.

He passed her his business card. "If you find out anything, can you give me a call?"

She nodded, taking the card. "Why are you so interested in her?" she asked suspiciously. "Do you like her or something?"

"Or something. She was real nice to me and I feel bad for treating her the way I did. I want to apologize and well, I know she's a student and I thought I'd do something nice for her."

"Like what? She's smart. You could give her a nice job at your company. She's sweet, too. If you really knew her, you'd like her. She wouldn't hurt anyone and she works real hard."

"Are you two good friends?"

Cleo flushed. "I don't think Marvin lets her have any friends, but we talked a lot. I got her to open up about stuff and I taught her a lot of stuff. Marvin never lets her interact with boys. I thought I'd die when I found out she was a twenty-year old virgin. She'd asked me a lot about sex and I'd tell her." She looked him over, wondering if she could work her wiles on him.

He stood up stiffly. "If you find anything, can you call me? I've been staying next door, but I don't know any more if I'll be moving in on the property any time soon."

"Yeah, sure. And if you get lonely next door and you want to talk about Nick, I've always got my door open."

Ethan had to wonder what else she would have opened if he accepted her offer. "Thanks, Happy Holidays." Once he left, he went next door and called the investigator on what he had found out. He knew this was enough evidence to get them out there to check on Nicole.

Chapter 8

Picking the millionth splinter out of her finger, she continued digging at the hole in the wall. She knew beyond the attic door was some space. Ten years ago, an electrical fire had hit the house and the backstairs that led up to the second floor hallway had caught on fire. Instead of building another staircase, Nanna hired someone to just build a ladder. So if there was another fire, no one would get trapped on the second floor. Another thing Nicole remembered the fire doing was messing up the attic, which was why her bedroom was almost like a closet. Nanna had enclosed the burned walls, promising to redecorate the upstairs as soon as they had the time. But other things happened and they were never able to get to it. The guy who had done the construction on the house though had made a makeshift closet sort of with a door over the ladder. But Nanna, thinking some crackhead might come and try to get in, put a master lock on the door.

Nicole knew exactly where the lock was positioned at by looking at the nail holes, but she also knew it would be faster to get the hinges off the door too and she could jump on the roof and go down. Her objective after that would be to make it to Cleo's house and get help for herself.

One hinge was loose and by the end of the night, she would have the other hinge off. From listening to the vents, she knew Nanna was still alive. Lynne and Marvin were arguing about ways to make the death look as natural as possible. They had told the nurses to stop coming.

Marvin had told her if she attracted any attention to her while she was in the room, he would come up there and beat her. He checked on her constantly during the day, but at night she knew he was with Lynne. Most times, he could hear them together. In a way, she almost thought her mother was becoming a prisoner in the house just like she had been. But he needed Lynne in order to get to the money that he wanted when they sold Nanna's business.

In two weeks, Mr. Mills would be paying a visit to the Laundromat to look it over and sign the papers. He insisted on meeting at the Laundromat, even though Lynne had tried to convince him to meet at Mills' office. If Nicole got out in time and contacted him, then there was a chance of saving the business. Whatever her mother had used to entice Mr. Mills to buy the business, she would have to find a way to get him not to buy it.

Right now, she had to work on her present objective and get out of there.

###

Cold rain practically froze her limbs to the bone. But she made it to Cleo's street and knocked on the door. She knew Cleo would be home because she had heard that they'd switched Cleo to the afternoon shift and that another girl worked the evening. But she walked by the Laundromat, making sure to look for Cleo's car.

When no one opened the door, she went around to a bedroom window and knocked on the glass pane. A light came on and she rushed back to the front door. Cleo flung the door open, ready to cuss someone out. But then the cigarette fell out of her mouth as she realized who the person was knocking on her door at three in the morning.

Helping her onto the couch, Cleo ordered her daughter to bring some covers and water. The oldest son was told to get some warm tea and put the leftover stew in the microwave. In between commands, Cleo kept demanding Nicole to tell her what happened.

"Tired," was all Nicole could say. She hadn't eaten in a month. Her first attempt at eating the cat food had made her throw up and her second attempt had almost killed her. She hadn't tried to eat anything else except some old junk food and candy she had in the book bags around her room. With the leak in the walls, when the rain came, she managed to drink, but not a lot because the salty water made her stomach hurt.

"I'll call the police," Cleo said, going to the phone.

"No. He'll kill me, Cleo. I can't let them know."

"He already has tried to kill you, Nicole. Look at you. You're almost skin and bones."

Nicole tried to sit up, but her body protested. Dizziness struck her immediately. "I need to find Mr. Mills before they get him to sign over Nanna's business. I can't let it happen."

"I'll go get someone to help us," Cleo said.

"Who?" She gripped Cleo's shirt, terrified Cleo would call Marvin. She didn't know who she could trust at this point because no one had come to help her. Cleo had been the closest she knew that had some dislike for Marvin, but she didn't know anymore.

"He's the neighbor. He's been looking for you."

"Who?"

"Just let me go get him." Cleo broke from her grip and ran out the front door.

Nicole knew she had to go. They'd take her back over there and Marvin would kill her. She gathered all her strength and got up, using the wall to get to the front door. The children just stared at her. She wrapped the covers around her for warmth against the frosty December air and went out the door. Almost falling down the stairs spraining her ankle, she made it and began to hobble down the street, not caring in what direction she was going.

Someone behind her called her name, but Nicole was delirious. She wasn't going to let them take her back. Somehow she'd get help from someone--anyone. Footsteps were getting close and she tried to run as fast as she could. She tripped over the sidewalk, hitting her nose on the cement. Warm blood flowed down her face, but she scrambled up and continued to run, not caring anymore where she went. She just wanted to get away from the footsteps.

"Nicole, stop!" the deep voice yelled.

The only thing she could surmise was that Marvin had caught up with her and was now going to kill her. This only gave her more strength. But everything looked so fuzzy and dim, yet she ran. Her body wanted to stop, but her mind was gone.

Darting through a muddied field, she jumped over a knocked down tree. So did the pursuer, who grabbed her pants leg. She fell again and when she tried to scramble up, something held her down by the legs. It was so dark and her vision was failing her because even her eyes were cold. She turned on her back and kicked at the large dark figure that crawled up her body as she tried to scoot back and get away. Finally, he pinned her. She couldn't scream because her throat hurt so much. She sobbed, fighting.

Ethan shook her so hard, but that only increased her fight to get him off of her. Finally, he slapped her cheek and she almost passed out. This sort of deluded her sense of balance that she had to fight for her own consciousness, ceasing her physical fight for a moment. Through the haze, she heard, "Nicole stop it! It's me!"

It couldn't be. Dear Lord not him. "Ethan," she rasped to be sure.

He had pressed his ear down to her mouth to hear her. "Yes, Nicole. Let me help you."

She sobbed, but this wasn't in fear. It was great relief as he scooped her cold, muddied body up and began to carry her. It didn't matter where he took her. She had a feeling she would be safe with him until at least the morning. Then she could get him to help her. He would help her, even if he probably did want sex. It didn't matter as long as he helped her.

###

Ethan looked down at her as they got into his home to see her in an exhausted sleep. Cleo followed them and she was too busy looking around the strange front room to notice where he laid Nicole. But when she noticed him heading to what looked to her to be a couch worth more than eight of her paychecks, she told him to stop. She ran in front of him and laid out a clean blanket she had brought from her home, knowing Nicole would need it when he brought her back.

Ethan impatiently let Cleo busy herself in getting the other blanket off before he laid her down, then he wrapped her up. "I'll take care of her, Cleo. Thank you." He wanted to be alone with her.

"We should call the police."

"Did she say so?"

"No. She told me not to or Marvin would kill her."

"I'll take care of everything. If she doesn't want the police called, we won't call them yet."

He went over to the fireplace and turned up the heat by adding more logs on the fire. When he turned to Cleo, he said, "Come over in the morning."

Cleo gave him a wary look. "Maybe she should stay at my place."

"I'm going to take care of her. I'll call my doctor and have him check on her and help her. Can you do that this time of night?"

"I could take her to the hospital."

"If she wanted to make known what was wrong with her, that would have been her first destination, don't you think?"

Cleo agreed, reluctantly. "I'll be over early."

"Don't call anyone or let anyone know where she's at, Cleo," he warned in his most serious tone. "At least until we can find out what happened to her. Obviously, she's terrified."

"She said she had to speak to Mr. Mills, but I don't know who that is."

"Can you find out?"

"I guess if I nosed around. I'm supposed to work a double at the Laundromat. I could look through some of Marvin's stuff while he's out picking his nose and gambling away all his money."

"Good. Do her that favor and then I want you to see if you can find information about Nanna too for her mind's sake. I'm sure she wants to know about her grandmother if she doesn't know anything already."

Cleo nodded and left.

Ethan turned back to her sleeping form and knelt by the sofa. Unwrapping her, he took off the clothes she wore that were practically molded to her body. Though she was asleep, she protested with moans. But, that was about it. Sleep seemed the best for her.

Dr. Desmond arrived about five. By this time, he had gotten her up to a guest room with a king size feather bed with lots of warm covers to bury her in. It had been difficult not to look at what he had revealed as he had taken off her clothes and cursed himself for becoming aroused at her.

"Mostly she's dehydrated. I started an IV for her to get her nutrients back. It might be a couple of days, but I'll be sending a nurse over in the morning to change the IV. If she awakes and demands to take it out, let her. But, make sure you keep her on the diet I've specified until she feels better." He handed him a paper. "It's a simple diet of soups and liquids; nothing heavy or dairy products. I've given her stitches to her nose and over her eye. Someone beat her pretty bad repeatedly. It wasn't just one time, but several times. Luckily there are no bones broken. But, she will need a lot of rest."

"That's understandable," he agreed.

"I'll make out a report for you. Whoever did this to her should be charged with something. There's even bite marks on her back and ..." he paused, looking very disturbed. "She was violated from behind. It looks like this took place over a week ago, but I can't be sure."

He cursed under his breath and hit the wall. "Fuck!"

"When she awakes, don't question her immediately. Just take it slow. If she wants to talk, then let her. But don't push her. I took some Polaroid pictures also and I'll keep these with the file. If she wants to press charges, I will be available."

Ethan thanked him and pressed a check in his hand. "Thank you, Dr. Desmond."

Once the doctor had gone, Ethan returned to her room and sat in the chair next to her, watching her sleep. He sat vigil there all night until the crew arrived to work on the home. He sent them home with pay. The nurse came to change her IV and give her another sponge bath. Ethan saw the nurse's look of distrust and he excused himself to get something to drink.

A shot of whiskey calmed his raging nerves. James was in the office and he told James to come to the site as soon as he could, but not to tell his bitch ex-wife where he was going. He knew Lynne still contacted him, but he would wring his brother's neck if Lynne showed her face in front of him. How could that woman allow this to happen? She had been in the home at the time of Nicole's supposed disappearance and she didn't know what happened to her daughter?

At least that was what Lynne had told the police when they had asked her of Nicole's whereabouts.

Ethan knew Lynne was lying. She knew exactly where Nicole had been and what that monster did to Nicole. Had Lynne held Nicole down for her uncle to rape her?

Nicole had been missing for about a month and Marvin had begun to tell everyone the girl had disappeared from her grandmother's bedside and run off. No one questioned it because everyone was aware of how bad Marvin treated her. It seemed logical, except to Ethan, who had come to know Nicole from what the customers and neighbors said. Nicole would never leave Nanna's side, no matter how bad Marvin was. She would never leave Nanna for anything.

Cleo came late that afternoon when Nicole was still sleeping. Ethan had changed into some black jeans and a nice black silk shirt. Right before she had arrived, he'd just gotten out the shower so his hair was still wet.

She seemed strangely alarmed at his disheveled appearance as she came in the front room. When she didn't see Nicole on the couch, she became alarmed.

"She's up in the guest room," he assured her.

"I would like to see her."

He didn't feel very comfortable with letting her see the rest of the house. The front room was specially modified to block others from seeing what the rest of the house contained. It wasn't that he didn't trust Cleo; he just knew the neighborhood he was in and couldn't go around showing off what kind of money he was investing into the home. Why he chose this side of town was only one reason - Nicole. In the end, he surmised that it had to do with wanting to be closer to her. He planned to sell the property once he had finished his revenge against Lynne. But now his plans were definitely going awry. How could he not care that something like this had happened to Nicole?

"Now, Mr. Black or I really will call the police."

"She's sleeping," he said stiffly.

"I don't care if she's dead. I want to see her."

He led her straight to the guest room, making sure he closed the doors to the other rooms so she wouldn't see the other parts of the lavishly furnished home. Soon as she saw Nicole lying on the bed with the tube in her arm, Cleo practically shoved him aside to get to her to see if she was still alive.

"How is she? The doctor really came?" Cleo demanded to know, looking Nicole over carefully.

Ethan nodded. "He said she was beaten repeatedly on different days and she was molested."

Cleo gasped. Tears welled in her eyes as she pushed the hair out of Nicole's. Reaching in her purse, she pulled out her comb and brush. "I'll fix her up real pretty. She'll like that."

"You don't have to."

"It's the least I could do. She always wore those ugly ponytails. She's pretty, Mr. Black, just like her heart." She was crying more. "I should have known. I should have told her to stay with me, but I...I didn't know."

He came around the bed. "I don't think anyone knew, but he called with the test results and she's clean. There's no infection, just scars."

Cleo held her hand. "I'll be back with some gowns for her. Is there anything you might need for her?"

"Nothing I can think of. Did you find anything out at the store?"

She dug through her purse and pulled out a torn piece of paper of a Laundromat sales slip with a name and number on it. "This is all I got. They plan on selling the Laundromat to this guy. They stopped the nurses from coming to see Nanna. I heard him talking to the doctor on the phone and he was lying to the doctor, saying he had gotten a private service for Nanna's care instead of the doctor's appointed nurses."

"What was the doctor's name?"

"Rucker. Dr. Rucker."

"Do you know the hospital she was rushed to last time?"

"The one nearby. Henry Ford."

"Thanks Cleo. Go ahead and get the stuff for her."

Cleo started to go past him, but she stopped, noting the concerned expression on his face as he stared longingly at the bed. "I'm sorry I didn't trust you last night and even today."

"I'm sorry I didn't trust you."

"She's a good girl and don't deserve to be hurt. She's never done anything to anyone. If I'd known this was happening to her, I'd done more; much more. Thank you for helping her." She leaned over and kissed his cheek. "You're a rare man, Mr. Black." When she was gone, he went to the bed.

Would Cleo still think like that when he broke Nicole's heart? All of his help wouldn't be for naught. That kind heart of hers would be useful in persuading her to give him her virgin heart. She would fall for him as soon as she opened her eyes and want to give her heart to him for his goodness. Cleo would tell her how he went out of his way to help her out and provide for her, and she would love him.

###

James came over shortly after Cleo left. The woman had changed Nicole from the ugly hospital-like robe the nurse had brought to a nice long gown. She'd brought over five other gowns of different styles and colors. In addition to this, Cleo had brought a bag the size of a duffle with every hair instrument ever used. After an hour of washing, pressing and curling, she had gotten Nicole to look like a sleeping beauty with her natural shoulder length hair so soft and beautiful that Ethan couldn't help but run his fingers through it once Cleo had left.

He allowed James only to glance at Nicole and in that quick glance, James gasped. "Damn if she don't look like her mother."

"She's not. Not in the least, so get any ideas out your mind."

"Should I be saying the same to you, brother?" he asked suspiciously, hearing the over-protectiveness in Ethan's voice.

Ethan sat down in the front room after opening the cabinet where the bar was and poured them both shots of whiskey. "I just have every intention of helping her."

"And yourself?"

"Shut up," he growled.

James chuckled, his green eyes much softer than his brother's, but contrasting with his pitch black hair, which he kept short. "I was just kidding, brother. So what's up?"

"What has Lynne said to you?"

"She's asked me for money, sex, and the usual. I've got Kris blowing her off these past two weeks. With the new projects you've got going, it's keeping us busy. What made you start the home improvement stuff? Winter's usually slow for us."

"I know, but I saw a need in these neighborhoods. Lots of single women need handy men around the house. Women see me and they flock like bees to honey from changing a stupid light bulb to lighting the gas. I figured we'd keep the guys on with internal home knowledge instead of laying them off like usual for the extra work. Is it good business?"

"Yeah, especially with the pay first plan."

"These aren't our regular customers. I don't want to get shagged. But, I also don't want to steal anything that doesn't belong to us."

"That's understandable." James downed the whiskey and coughed a bit as the fluid warmed his veins. "What do you plan on doing with her now? Getting the officials to arrest Lynne?"

"Only if she wants to press charges. We'll have to see once she wakes up. Until then, can you do me a favor?"

"Maybe. The last favor was getting those pictures of your wife to look real good for the detective." He chuckled. "I'm not saying I didn't enjoy the ride, but she can get pretty boring at times. I don't know how you did it for three years."

"Fuck you, James. You only did it because you were trying to make up for shagging my wife in the first fucking place. But I need you to put up with it a little more. Think you can do that for me?"

James didn't look pleased, but he reluctantly nodded. "I guess, but you'll have to tell me why."

"I need to give Nicole time to get well. They plan on doing something and I think they wanted her out the way in order to do it." He passed his brother the information about Parker Mills. "Find out what he has to do with the business without getting up Lynne's suspicion, would you?"

"That's fine." James stood up. "You'll owe me a big birthday gift, brother."

"You'll get a kick in the ass."

James hooted, amused. "I'll pass."

###

Two evenings later, Nicole slowly opened her eyes and just stared up at the wall. He watched her from across the room, not drawing any attention to him. She looked around the bed and the dimly lit room. Ethan knew he could not be seen in the dark corner.

Sitting up, she pushed the covers away and inspected the IV in her arm. After a few moments, she yanked the needle from there, then tried to move, but gasped and flushed all over.

"I wouldn't be so quick to do anything," he said from his corner.

She turned sharply in his direction. Ethan came forward and sat up on the bed. "The nurse will be here in an hour to check on you. She'll take off the catheter."

Her throat was dry and he knew this. There was a cold pitcher of water next to the bed. He filled it for her in a glass, and then handed it to her. "You've been sleep for a couple of days. You had a fever the first night, but it went away. Dr. Desmond said you'll feel like shit, but he gave you a shot of antibiotics. The nurse will be able to take care of any other concerns when she comes."

She nodded, but there were still a lot of questions in her eyes.

Lightly, he kissed her cheek. "Cleo's coming over when she gets off at one. I told her it was alright although I didn't know you'd be awake then. Get some rest." He pointed to a bell on the table next to her. "If you need anything, just ring. There was a small infection in your throat, which is why it feels like you swallowed a million nails."

Again she nodded and smiled softly.

He started to leave the bed, but she took his hand to hold him there. Leaning over, she kissed his cheek and whispered, "Thank you."

It was his turn to blush. When he got up this time, she let him as she laid down. She was asleep before he returned to his chair. He moved it closer to the bed while he waited for the nurse to come.

He left the room to give them privacy. David's mother, who was a great cook, brought over some soup. David had told his mother that his girlfriend had gotten real sick and was hurt bad. The woman was kind and since Ethan had helped with a lot of things around her home that her landlord wouldn't take care, she was more than happy to give him a hand at sticking to the doctor's diet for Nicole. Tonight, she brought a nice cream soup with mushrooms and finely diced chicken with noodles. It smelled delicious.

"I brought an extra helping for you, too. You should eat as well."

Ethan had to insist she take the money he offered, and reluctantly she did and left.

When the nurse left, he returned to Nicole's room. She was changed into a nice pink gown, her hair freshly combed, still down although the front drawn back out her face, looking very refreshed after the warm sponge bath.

He placed the tray carefully on her lap. It was big enough to hold both of their bowls. He made tea for her while he took a cold beer. She looked amused at this as she tasted the soup and smiled with pleasure. Ethan told her who had cooked it and then explained the neighbors had been more than helpful with him since they found out he was taking care of a sick "friend."

"They've never met you, but they knew I wasn't out as much as I usually am and David's mother let them know I was taking care of an ill friend. They've been giving me so much help that I'm almost overwhelmed with saying thank you so much."

Her voice was but a whisper when she said, "Thank you cards."

He snapped his fingers. "That's a good idea." He winked at her in thanks for her great idea.

They ate and he talked nonstop about everything from Nanna's condition to who Parker Mills was. Nanna was getting worse, but holding on. What they were telling her about Nicole's whereabouts was unknown to anyone.

Parker Mills had offices out in Southfield and as soon as she was well, she could contact him for a meeting.

Again she thanked him and he told her, "Quit that. It's no problem."

Nicole looked away, seeing the look of concern in his eyes. Why he'd offered his hand of friendship out this way was a mystery to her, but she intended to get down to the bottom of it. When they were done eating, he took the dishes away and then brought in a toothbrush, with rinse and a bowl. After she brushed her teeth, he asked if she needed anything else. She pretended tiredness and he left her so she could rest. When he thought she was asleep, he came back in and sat down beside her to stare at her.

Nicole kept her breathing even and slow. She was glad when Cleo came by. He left them alone and Cleo filled her in on the other things he had gone out his way and done. Cleo even helped her to the bathroom, which she'd been too embarrassed to ask him to help with. There was one connected to the room.

Nicole tried to speak, but was only good at muttering one word sentences with hand gestures. Cleo let her know she was at one of the houses he was fixing up. Nicole was shocked to know he was the one who had bought the houses next to Cleo. He was working night and day on them and his other projects, until she had came here. He never left the house now at all and had said he'd gotten someone to assist him on the other projects.

Before leaving the bathroom, she paused at the mirror and was shocked to see herself. Cleo explained she had taken the liberty of doing that. Nicole had never had her hair done except to have her ends cut and her hair washed and pressed. Other than that, she oiled it every three days and put it up in a ponytail or cornrows.

"Do you like it?" Cleo asked.

She nodded her approval.

Cleo helped her back to the bed and tucked her in. "I'll be back in a couple of days. Don't try to rush yourself. If you need me, make him come get me, okay?"

Nicole assured her she would.

###

The next morning while he was passed out in the chair by her bed, she got enough strength to make it to the bathroom by herself. When she came out, he was by the door and startled her, making her trip over her feet. But he caught her and carried her to the bed. Her throat was feeling much better, but she didn't strain it by fussing over him carrying up. When he laid her in the bed, he didn't draw away and she didn't force him to move his arms from around her.

They stared long into each other's eyes. His then wandered down to her lips and she felt him edge closer.

"How do you feel?" he asked, genuinely concerned.

"Fine." She cleared her throat. "I feel good."

The intenseness in his eyes affected her greatly, but she hoped he didn't notice and think her shivering was because the room was cool, when it was her body reacting to his proximity. How could she possibly be thinking of making love to him at this point in time, although the nurse said she was fine to carry on any usual activities? The nurse had even noted that her boyfriend seemed very concerned about her well being and would need "comfort." She hadn't gotten over the idea of the nurse thinking she was his girlfriend, let alone assure her she wouldn't be doing any "comforting."

He released her and sat in the nearest chair. "You sound better."

"I feel better."

The doorbell rang. "That would be breakfast," he figured and rushed off.

Before returning, it looked as if he'd gotten washed up and changed into another shirt. He smelled nice and he hadn't buttoned the shirt up at all. She tried not to notice the well defined muscles on the bare darkly tanned skin, with the rippled stomach muscles. This time, there wasn't an extra plate of food on the tray for him and he watched her eat quietly, staring at her.

She was famished and quickly downed the grits and eggs with toast on the side. There was another bowl of leftover soup from last night and some orange juice. When she was done, he again brought the toothbrush and bowl. It was too kind of him and she was feeling rather spoiled.

"I think I should leave soon," she said when he returned after disposing of the dishes.

"Where will you go? Back home to Marvin?"

"Back home to Nanna."

"I could help you get her out of there."

"And do what? Take her to a hospital. She wants to stay at home."

"Even when they could kill her?"

"I'm not going to argue with you." She pushed the covers off her legs and sat up with her feet on the floor. "I would like my clothes to leave."

"I threw them away. They were filthy."

"Then I can borrow some from Cleo."

"I have some more for you, but you'll rest. A couple of more days won't kill you to rest. The rest was much needed and you don't need to be out in that weather after that horrible infection in your throat."

"You don't have any right keeping me here."

"I will and you'll like it."

Angrily at his stubbornness, she said, "You're no better than Marvin."

He came over to the bed in two strides. "Then maybe I ought to rape you like he did," he seethed over her.

Her breath caught in her throat at his cruelty, but she fought the tears that wanted to come at the painful memories. When he reached out to comfort her, she snatched away and moved from him. "Get out!" she ordered.

Ethan huffed and left, slamming the door behind him. Damn woman drove him to lose his calm. She thought nothing of herself or her safety. If she wasn't the most unselfish person he had ever met.

Nicole stood up and went over to the closet. There wasn't anything in there so she went over to the dresser, where only gowns and underwear were. Cursing, she went back to the bed. She wouldn't stay here another moment with him. He was kind one moment, hurtful the next. Not another moment.

He didn't come back to her room until dinner, when he delivered pasta in cream sauce. He didn't eat with her, but left some books to read, which she eagerly read to keep her mind occupied. When she awoke the next morning early, she listened out for him in the hallway. When she didn't hear anything, she opened the door and walked out the room to the bare floor of the hallway. There was some hammering going on downstairs so she assumed that was where he was. There was a chill in the air, but that was fine and she wouldn't be out here for long. Going down the hallway, she opened the first door she got to. This was another bedroom and she gasped as the bed was even bigger than hers with bars at the top. The decor was a beautiful lavender and gold, and she could tell this had been an extra room with the wall taken out. There was a private bathroom in there and curiosity got the best of her and she entered it.

The largest bathtub she had ever seen occupied this one. Along with the gold and black décor was a beautiful bear rug in the middle of the floor. She couldn't resist kneeling down and touching the soft fur. Then, she froze at the light chuckle behind her. Looking around, she gasped, seeing him naked standing over by the sink located behind the door. Quickly turning away from him, she huffed. "Could you put something on?"

"Excuse me, I'm in my bathroom," he snapped.

"Then I'll leave." When she started to do that, the door closed and she refused to look in his direction, knowing he was purposely standing in her way.

"Why?" Ethan asked. "Obviously you came in here for a reason."

She flushed and angrily turned to him, not caring that he was standing there akimbo naked as the day he was born. "I came to find some clothes."

"And who do you know puts their clothing in the bathroom?" he questioned.

"Shut up!" she snapped.

"If you think that's going to get you out of here, then you've got another thing coming."

"I don't care if I was dying, you are the most frustrating man I've ever met and I wish I never met you!"

His eyes narrowed to slits and he moved toward her slowly, like an animal stalking. "Then maybe I ought to take you right back to Marvin so he can kill you."

"He won't kill me."

"He'll just molest you again."

So angry, she slapped him, then gasped and quickly apologized, stepping back from him. "Leave me alone."

He rubbed his cheek, then moved over and put a towel around his waist. "You aren't stepping foot in that house, Nicole. Not as long as he's there."

"I need to see Nanna."

"You need to take a rest. I'm sure Nanna would agree. You almost died out there and he almost killed you. I won't take you back there so he can kill you."

"They'll hurt Nanna."

"What if I go over there and see her?" he suggested.

"I want to see her."

"You don't think I can?"

"I want to see her!" she stressed, even more frustrated. "She's my grandmother. I've taken care of her since she got sick. They'll hurt her just like they always wanted to."

"Then they'll hurt you. We can call her doctor tomorrow," he assured her, coming back over to her. "I swear Nicole. I'll do what I can to help you as long as it doesn't jeopardize your life."

"What do you care for?"

His long strong fingers gently caressed her cheek. "Because it's a free country."

"Or because you think this is going to get you a good fuck. Well think again, Ethan." She walked away from him, toward the door. "I'm not the least attract-"

She would have finished if his lips weren't covering hers and she wasn't responding like her life depended upon it. She would have finished telling him how much she detested him if she wasn't pushing the towel off of him and touching his beautiful body like it was the last thing she would ever touch.

So when he laid her down on that bearskin rug and began to kiss her all over, pushing her gown off her body and sucking the tips of her breast, sending waves of ecstasy through her nerves, she couldn't think of one thing disgusting or disliking about this gorgeous man. Every part of his body worshipped her deep chocolate skin to passion's goddess. As his mouth paid homage to her womanhood, sending mind and body in a fit, she knew she would want this man again and again.

His mouth moved up to capture hers and she could taste herself on his lips, increasing the eroticism. Carefully, he placed a towel underneath her as he also placed the tip of him at her womanly orifice. She was way past caring how he would end her wanton torture. She just wanted him more and more, but felt him stiffen slightly.

Ethan was straining, holding back from giving her any pain. But, her writhing was driving him crazy. Wrapping her legs around his waist securely, she thrust upward and at the same time, pushed his wrist away so that he buried himself deep inside of her. The hot searing pain made her scream so high pitched that she couldn't hear her voice in her own head. But he'd heard it and thought he'd killed her by the way her whole body stiffened.

Slowly her eyes opened and Ethan waited for her to tell him to continue. But the seriousness caught him off guard. He leaned down to kiss her, but she turned her face away.

She spoke deep and slowly, "Get...off."

He wasn't sure if he heard her right. "Nicole, we haven't finished-"

"Get off!"

Ethan was sure she just didn't understand what was going on. She had just lost her virginity and it was okay to be scared. "Let me finish-"

"No!" With great strength, she dislodged him and jumped up. "Stay away from me!" Running out of the room, she didn't stop running until she had gotten into her bathroom, where she locked herself in.

He was right behind her, with the towel loosely around his waist. But he didn't catch the door before it closed. Knocking, he said, "Nicole, you can't just leave like that in the middle of it."

"I can and I did," she screamed from the other side of the door.

"You're just confused."

"No, I was confused before all this. But now I know why Marvin never wants me to do it. I should have listened. Stay away from me, Ethan."

"Dammit, Nicole. Give me a chance."

"You had your chance, Ethan." She was making a lot of racket and for the life of him, he couldn't figure out what the hell she was doing. Water was running suddenly and he heard her getting in the shower.

He wanted to break the door down and just as he was preparing to throw his shoulder against it, the door opened. She'd straightened her gown. Her hair was thrown back into the ponytail and she walked straight back in his room. He followed her, waiting for her to say something - anything regarding what had just happened. But she was paying more attention to the walls than to him.

"Nicole, it was your first time. It was supposed to hurt."

"It was?" she asked. "I guess next you're going to say I shouldn't tell anybody. Or it's our secret?" Tears welled up in her eyes at the horrible memories of Marvin's words.

"No. I'm not him. I'm not your uncle." He sounded hurt, but she didn't care. He'd hurt her.

She found a drawer with some jogging suits and grabbed a shirt and pair of pants, then slipped them on. "I'm leaving. I'm going back home and you aren't going to stop me."

"Dammit Nicole-"

"If you aren't going to stop me, then don't stand in my way, Ethan."

He came over to her. She was being stubborn and hardheaded. Was she crazy? Did she understand Marvin could kill her? "Do you even care about your own life, Nicole?"

"Not when Nanna's life means a lot more to me. She means more to me than my own because she fought so hard for me to be here, Ethan. If I could, I would give my heart to her to make her better. Don't you understand?" She cried, tears streaming down her cheek.

He pulled her in his arms to hold her. "Yes Nicole, I do. I'll help." His kissed her cheek as her arms went around his neck in appreciation for his understanding.

Chapter 9

He pulled the company truck two houses away from Nanna's house. He would have pulled closer, but the police and ambulance were blocking the middle of the street.

They both looked at each other, wondering what was going on, until they both saw Nanna being carried on a stretcher and placed in the ambulance. An ESO was on top of her, pumping her chest to resuscitate her. Before Ethan could stop her, Nicole was jumping out of the truck and running toward the ambulance. But the police stopped her. She demanded to get inside the ambulance, but the double doors closed and the police still held her back. The ambulance took off for the hospital with Nanna inside.

Nicole wailed her pain for her grandmother.

Looking through the crowd toward the house, she saw Marvin and Lynne standing there signing some papers for an officer, then he walked away.

Ethan watched from the truck her heading toward the house and gripped the steering wheel, wondering if he should get out the car to join her. To follow her meant letting Lynne and Marvin know of his involvement with Nicole, but he wasn't sure if he wanted them to know yet. Would Nicole be hurt enough when she found out? Would Nicole's pain be worth it all? Damn his guilty conscious. When did that start coming into play in his quest for the ultimate revenge against his now ex-wife?

He waited and watched.

Nicole went straight up to Marvin and shoved him with all of her might and anger that she had inside of her. "What did you do?" she demanded to know. "What did you do to her?"

Marvin grabbed her arms to keep her from hitting him in the chest. "If you were here, then you would know what happened. Nanna had a relapse."

"Relapse? You're lying! You tried to kill her, didn't you?"

"If you weren't running off, then maybe Nanna would be fine."

"I ran off to save my life."

"You ran off to find your lover, you selfish bitch."

She backhanded him with all her might and she wasn't sorry about it.

Lynne stepped up quickly between them, seeing Marvin bawling up his fist to hit Nicole back. "Maybe we should calm down," she insisted.

They glared heatedly at each other, both knowing the truth as to why she ran away. Marvin's eyes dared her to speak the truth.

"I think we all need to get inside," Lynne suggested.

Nicole broke eye contact with Marvin and glared at her mother. "I think you ought to tell the police exactly what he did to Nanna. Don't you care one bit about her? She was your mother; your flesh and blood. The only one who cared about your selfish horrible self was Nanna because I don't care whether *you* live or die. I wish *you* were dying. I wish *you* had the bad heart because you don't deserve to live another day!"

Lynne stiffened at the hard words of her daughter. Nicole turned to walk away, but Marvin grabbed her arm.

"Where do you think you're going?" he sneered, jerking her back to him.

She tried to snatch out of his grip, but he held tight.

"I think you should come into the house," he said, pulling her toward the door of the house.

Nicole desperately tried to get away without making a scene for the crowd that was now dissipating. She looked back over her shoulder to see if Ethan had left her.

"Come Nicole, you can go to the hospital with us."

She knew Marvin had no intentions of letting her out the house again. If he had his way, she would forever be locked up in that room for the rest of her life. She didn't want to go through that again. Lynne only stood there watching, not doing anything. Nicole began to struggle more.

"I think you should let the girl go," a voice came through to them from the street.

Marvin stopped his dragging and looked in the direction of the voice.

Ethan stepped up on the curb, lighting a cigarette and taking a long drag.

"Mind your own business, mister," Marvin seethed.

Lynne gasped, "What the hell are you doing here?"

Ethan came up to the porch. "I think he should let her go."

"Get the hell off of my property." Marvin swung Nicole behind him, holding her wrist still very tight.

"And I think Nicole can let us know where she wants to go because I don't think she wants to go in that house." Ethan stepped up to Marvin.

"This has nothing to do with you," Lynne cried.

"As long as he's got his hands on Nicole, it has everything to do with me."

Lynne looked from Ethan to Nicole. "How do you know him?" she demanded of her daughter.

Nicole wasn't paying much attention to her mother's words. Ethan's words brought so much encouragement inside Nicole and she brought her knee up and hit Marvin between the legs, then elbowed him in the spine. He let her go and fell to the ground. Nicole jumped over his body and moved to Ethan's side. Marvin made a weak attempt to get to Nicole, but he was in so much pain that he couldn't get up. He ordered Lynne to not let her go. Ethan took her hand and they began to walk away.

Lynne called for her daughter, following them. But Nicole continued to walk toward the truck. "Ethan, what are the two of you doing together?"

Nicole stopped instantly and turned slowly to look at her mother then to Ethan, who looked very stiff. "How does she know your name?" When Ethan didn't answer, she looked at her mother. "How do you know his name?"

"I know his name because he's my husband. He's Ethan Black."

"Ex-husband!" Ethan sneered, finding his tongue.

Nicole snatched away from his hand as the truth came to her. She grasped her chest, not knowing if she could breathe through all of this. "You're her husband?" She took several steps back. "You knew all the time. You knew I was her daughter, didn't you?!" she screamed. "Didn't you?!"

Ethan closed his eyes, trying to remain calm. This wasn't how he'd planned it. This wasn't how he was supposed to feel.

She needed no confirmation from him to know exactly what was going on. "You stay away from me," she seethed, barely able to get the words out. "I never want to see you again...EVER." With that, she ran down the street.

Ethan wanted to go after her. He really did, but his feet wouldn't move, his body wouldn't follow. Instead, he turned around to see that look in Lynne's eyes - that angry, confused, defeated look.

"You went after my daughter?" she asked, blinking hard. "Even after you destroyed me financially and socially, you still went after my daughter? How could you?"

He grounded out the cigarette and smiled wickedly. "I was trying to be like you and keep it all in the family, Lynne."

"Are you done with your deceit?" she asked disgustedly. "Or would you like to go to the hospital and fuck my mother too before she dies?"

"You better hope she doesn't because I'll make sure the investigator looks to you for foul play."

"This has nothing to do with you."

"It does as long as Nicole cares."

"Stay away from my daughter."

"Fuck you."

"What more do you want, Ethan? Has hurting my daughter healed what I've done to you? You've taken everything away from me. Everything and you have the gall to go and break my daughter's heart?"

"I had to go and break the next best thing since you don't have one." He walked to his truck and jumped inside. Peeling out of there at a high speed, he felt almost complete. He'd done it! He'd gotten his revenge against that whore! She was standing there speechless, hurt, and ruined.

So why did he feel like an ass?

Chapter 10

Going through so much, she wouldn't be surprised if she had a nervous breakdown. The doctor had offered something to help sleep, but she didn't want anything. She didn't like the dreams about Ethan she continued to have.

On her third day vigil by her grandmother's side, a very handsome man with gorgeous green eyes and pitch black hair came in the room. He was three inches taller than Ethan, with the same muscular build and a smile that could light up a room. When he introduced himself as James Black by handing her a business card, she told him exactly where he could stick the business card. He only chuckled and found a seat next to her.

Nicole hissed, "Didn't you hear what I said?"

"I'm not like my brother," he said.

"Whatever you have to say about that man to me, you're only wasting your breath."

"He told me the same thing when I told him I was coming over to see you. He also said he'd break my neck if I slept with you."

"Why should he care? He's got his revenge."

James lowered his eyes to his briefcase in his lap. "I thought you said you didn't want to speak about him."

"That would be the reason why you came, isn't it?"

He shook his head. "To be honest, partly. He asked me to do something for him and I thought I should get the news to you since you won't see him. I figured this was pretty important to you, unless you aren't interested in saving your grandmother's business."

She sat up, glaring at him warily. "How could you possibly help me?"

"By setting up an appointment with Parker Mills a day early before your uncle and mother meet with him. If you have a sweeter deal for him, then I suggest you make a ploy for him now. They owe him a great deal of money."

She wanted the meeting, but she wasn't sure what or how she could sweeten the deal. "How much is owed?"

"A quarter of a million."

She buried her head in her hands.

"Talk with your mother's lawyer. Maybe he could help you out, Nicole." He placed his card on her lap. "Call me to confirm or let my secretary. Kristen knows what's going on and she'll get any and all messages to me immediately." He paused and then added, "She also could get any messages to Ethan too if need be."

"No, it's not needed," Nicole sneered.

He shrugged. "Too bad. Because she's really good at getting them to him more quickly than me."

After he was gone, she went to the pay phone and called Armando Bellini. To her good luck, he was on his way to Detroit and could meet her in Southfield at the St. Royal Hotel tomorrow. She called Cleo to see if she could stay at Nanna's side for her. Cleo eagerly agreed.

Armando looked in his early thirties and she was surprised to know he was younger than that at 27. "I'm the baby of the Bellini family in my generation. I was the youngest child my aunt raised because my mother died in a car accident. My aunt amazingly mothered over ten children when I was younger. We don't consider ourselves cousins, or adopted siblings, or friends. We're a close-knit family. My sister's best friend and law partner actually represented your mother's ex-husband in their divorce," he said matter of factly.

"I really don't give a fig about that man," she sneered. "I want to discuss Nanna's options. I don't want to sell."

"She said you wouldn't."

"What else did she say?"

"You'd take care of things and would be the only one to look out for her best interest. I must remind you though; receiving Nanna's estate is a big responsibility."

"Why?"

"Your grandfather invested in a lot of older stocks and Nanna's been hoarding that money like it was a secret. I didn't understand until she explained to me that even her daughter is out to ruin her and if they knew about the money, she would never have a penny to her name." He called for a waitress to refill their drinks. She opted for orange juice instead of liquor.

Nicole informed him of the large debt owed to Parker Mills.

"I have good news and I have bad news. The good news is you have the money to pay it off; the bad news is in order to get to that money, Nanna has to either sign for it herself or die so the assets can revert to you. I am only here to make sure her true will is read and letters delivered. I have no power over the money. I know about it

though and can even tell you what bank she's got it in, but I can't touch it. You see, I usually only work for family members. But my uncle Antonio Bellini II owed a favor to your grandfather, and Nanna called in that favor when she didn't know anyone else to turn to. Uncle Tony of course came to me and I said I would personally handle the matter because we take favors very seriously. I came here the day before Nanna had the stroke and worked out power of attorney papers and also the new will, including a living will as well."

"So I can try to make a deal with Parker Mills, but I'm on my own."

"I can tell you your options and how high you should go before, but that is about it. Like I said, I'm only here to help Nanna and her best interest."

She should be mad. He was basically telling her unless she laid a wad of money out for him for his services, he wouldn't give her crap, but he was a lawyer. She shouldn't expect much and he was doing his job - looking out for Nanna's best interest.

"Tell me what you think and I will go from there."

Armando smiled assuredly. "You're a pretty smart kid, Nicole. I'm sure you will know what to do when the time comes."

"I'll bet," she snorted. "Because if I mess it up, you'll step in and make sure Nanna's interests are saved right?"

He laughed. "You get the picture. I take my job very serious."

She knew someone else who was serious as well. Both of them got on her last nerve about now.

Chapter 11

Cleo allowed her to borrow her car to make it to the Parker Mills office. She was impressed by the building and the courtesy area. The secretary led her to a large conference room that seated ten people very comfortably. She was seated at the first chair by the head seat. When offered something to drink, she declined politely because her stomach was doing flips like a Sea World dolphin.

The three-piece dark brown rayon suit she had borrowed from Cleo was two sizes too big for her. But with a lot of pins, they'd gotten the size twelve suit down to look very professional on her. Cleo had swept her hair up into a fashionable bob and applied a light touch of makeup. The black patent leather heels were pretty weird to wear, but she managed. If she walked slowly, she actually looked like she knew what she was doing. Underneath the vest, she wore a white French cuffed blouse.

Yesterday had been her birthday and she celebrated it by sitting by Nanna's side. Again Cleo had come to the hospital to tag team with her on Nanna's vigil. She didn't trust anyone to stay beside Nanna other than Cleo and she was glad Cleo was there for her.

Focusing her thoughts, she concentrated on making her best presentation to Parker Mills. According to James, when he put it bluntly, Parker Mills was a serious ass, but he loved deals. He lived for them and he was an old high school buddy of Ethan Black. He had inherited the laundry business from his father and had taken over several cleaners in the Detroit and suburban areas. He did a lot of services for business, but was looking into privately held residential businesses to expand. She was very impressed with the information James had given her about the company. It would be an honor to meet the man in person and learn from him if he gave her the chance.

James warned her that Parker Mills could smell bullshit instantly and he didn't play when it came to money owed to him. If she stayed honest and truthful and stayed realistic, she had a chance.

When the doors to the conference opened, it came quite a surprise to see that Parker Mills was an African American male who looked no older than about twenty-nine. He walked like there was a stick up his ass and with the bi-focals and stiff three-piece dark grey Armani suit, he was definitely the stiff prick James had described. This was the first time she had met anyone of African American nature who possessed so much money, and she knew this would be an even bigger challenge than what she had thought it would be.

She could have handled it better if he was white and on top of that, he was very handsome if one looked past those awful glasses.

He regarded her nonchalantly as he closed the door and told his secretary not to bother him until he was done. That made her feel very important and she hoped this was going to go better than what she thought it would go. He approached the conference table, looking a little doubtful as he assessed her.

Nicole saw that he stood about six feet tall and bullock under the suit. She didn't know if it was fat or just muscle. But either way, the suit was definitely tailored rather nicely on him.

"Ms. Gray?" he seemed doubtful.

"Yes, Nicole Gray." She shook his hand.

He seemed off guard and his chocolate eyes squinted at her. "You look familiar."

"I'm often mistaken for my mother, Lynne Black."

This relaxed him immensely. "Yes, she sometimes comes with your uncle, Marvin Clark. You're almost a living image of her, but I must say there is something magnificent about you."

He offered her a seat and he followed suit, straightening up his clothes beside her.

"Mr. Mills, before we begin I want to say how much I appreciate you taking the time out for me on such short notice. A man such as you probably remains busy and I am very impressed by all you hold."

He nodded a thank you.

"That's why I want you to understand that I don't want to sell the Laundromat to you. I want to remain a partner."

He sat back, still listening intently, but showing absolutely no emotion.

"I won't be able to pay back the money my uncle has borrowed in such great access. But I will be able to work out some kind of deal with you that keeps Nanna's interest at the heart of the business."

"I've been trying to get my hands on this property for some time now and until your grandmother got sick, I couldn't get word or edgewise from that lady. Now with your uncle willing to sell, what makes you think I need to work out a deal with you?"

"Because, according to the agreement my grandmother has with my uncle, even though he has final control over the company, there is twenty percent still in her name and ten percent in mine. With I being my

grandmother's guardian, that means I have thirty percent control over the sale of the company. I am aware my uncle owes you a great deal of money and I'm willing to give you that money back with interest and a percentage of the stock in the company if you work with me. If you don't work with me, I can hold up the sale of any of the business altogether and sue you and my uncle for any money owed to me that has already transacted." She laid out the original agreement from which Nanna initially signed over to Marvin. "I don't know what he told you or what documents he showed you to make you believe he owned the company. But until Nanna dies, he only has part control."

Parker looked over the papers and then buzzed his secretary to bring him the Gray Laundromat file. In a few moments, a folder was brought to them and he looked through until he found a document similar to the one she had laid out to him. Looking down at the control, there were changes and the signatures were false, except for Marvin's and the lawyers.

This man did not look pleased as he closed the file and gave her a long hard look. "So in order to get my hands on the company, you want me to have Marvin sign over his part tomorrow to me, and then you will keep your part and pay back the money owed to me?"

"Yes. In addition to sweeten this deal, I will give you the land next to the Laundromat, which I think will make a nice strip mall. If you survey the area, a small grocery and hardware/supply store is much needed in the area. With Nanna's reputation, I am positive the neighborhood will support your improvements."

"What is being done with the property now?"

"Collecting dust. Due to Nanna's stroke after she bought the property, she was not well enough to expand on the extension like she wanted. But I can share the plans with you if you'd like or you can sell it to anyone you wish. But I will keep my part in it."

"If I don't go with your deal, of course there's years of litigation involved."

She leaned in close to him. "Mr. Mills, I assure you I can handle the business. I plan to make major changes and working with you, I'm sure we can make a very good profit without my uncle involved."

"Does family mean nothing to you?"

"Not when the family doesn't look out for the well being of my grandmother and takes all she has sweated blood and tears for and throws it away on anything and everything except what is important. I take that serious; Mr. Mills and I will do anything to make sure my grandmother's business stays with me. This is how she wants it."

"I do understand your point, but you leave me in a very difficult position with Mr. Clark," he noted. "I will think on it."

"I was hoping for an answer today since you will be meeting with Mr. Clark tomorrow."

"I can't give you a decision now, but I will take heed on all you have said and give you an answer day after tomorrow. On your way out, you may pick up the copy of your document from the receptionist." He stood up. "Good day, Ms. Gray."

When she returned to the hospital, Cleo was a little disappointed to know there was no definite decision. "I have a little good news of my own," Cleo said, bubbling with excitement as they walked down to the cafeteria while the orderlies gave Nanna a sponge bath. "What?"

"He asked about you today. When I was coming out, he asked how you were doing."

"I really don't care-"

Cleo cut her off. "That's a lie. The way he sounded, I know the two of you really hit it off. He really likes you, Nicole."

"That's not the point, Cleo. Even if I did like him, I wouldn't go back with him."

"He told me you two had some kind of argument and that you weren't talking to him."

Suspiciously, she questioned, "Is he trying to enlist your aid in getting to me?"

Cleo shook her head. "No, but I think you're making a big mistake and you're being the biggest bigot in the world."

"Bigot?" Obviously Ethan had not told her the whole story and Cleo was coming to her own conclusions. "This has nothing to do with his color."

"Is it his age, because thirty-three is not that old."

"It's as old as my mother."

"No one told your mother to go spreading her legs open at thirteen. Come on, Nicole, you've got to have a better reason than those for being mad at him. The man is working himself into exhaustion and I think it's just

because of you. You're mature, he's mature, and I think you'd make a really good couple. He really cares for you, Nicole."

"I don't think you understand the situation, Cleo."

"I understand he's a sweet guy and that's something you need. I understand he'd take really good care of you. I've seen him when you were sick, how good he takes care of you, and I understand if you give him a chance, he could mean a lot to you. What more is there to understand? This doesn't have anything to do with your mom anymore."

"He told you about that?"

"He mentioned due to some ties he had with your mom in the past, it could affect your relationship today."

Nicole huffed. "Just like him to come out smelling like roses, Cleo. Men are so deceitful."

"I don't really care what happened with your mother and him and neither should you. He wants to be with you and that's all that counts. Nicole, I think you should give him a chance. I think he can bring a lot to the table regarding pleasing you. He looks like he could pack something big for you."

Nicole flushed, getting her meaning. "You mean having sex?"

"Yes! I wouldn't mind giving him a ride myself if he wasn't so dedicated to you."

"I don't want any part of him. I've had a taste of it Cleo and it's not all it's cracked up to be."

Cleo's eyes went big as saucers. "You did it?"

Nicole confessed, so glad to be able to tell someone about it. "Yes, and it was horrible Cleo. There was so much pain."

"Pain?" Cleo looked confused. "Were you ready for him? Was there any foreplay? Did he touch you?"

If she were any lighter, she was positive her cheeks would be scarlet. "Yes, there was foreplay and before he did it, I was feeling very good."

"Maybe you were uptight and nervous."

Nicole was frustrated, not really knowing how to explain to her what happened. "I expected to be nervous on my first time, but until he hurt me like that, it was feeling nice."

Cleo almost choked on her coffee. "You're a virgin, Nicole?"

"It's no big thing. That has nothing to do with what happened."

"That has everything to do with it, Nicole. Did it hurt at first?"

"Like a hot knife. That's why I told him to take it out."

"You what? You didn't finish? How could you do that to him Nicole?"

"Do that to him? What about what he did to me? He hurt me."

"You probably didn't let him finish."

"I was bleeding all over the place."

Cleo drew Nicole in her arms for comfort. "That's because you're supposed to bleed. You would have been okay. I'm surprised he didn't kill you. Didn't anyone ever tell-" She stopped. "You poor thing. It's important you finish it with him, Nicole. Especially after everything you went through with Marvin and-"

Nicole drew away. "How did you know?"

"Ethan told me. I felt so bad when I knew Marvin did that."

"It only happened once." She sat down outside of Nanna's room. "He dragged me up there after Lynne left the night of the beating and said he'd make sure no man would want to touch me after he got through. I passed out at the first sign of pain and when I woke up, I was locked in the room, feeling like death warmed over me."

"You don't think you should speak to someone regarding what happened to you?"

Nicole shrugged. "I guess."

"I also think you should finish what you started with Ethan. It's the only way. You were a virgin and you'll be forever traumatized if you don't. Next time, just do it all the way."

"I'm never doing that again. Especially with him."

"You have to go and do it with him or you'll be scarred for life."

"I won't, Cleo. I can't. There's too much to think about right now." She was really getting frustrated. "You don't know the whole story behind it all and I really don't want to go into it. He used me."

"So what! Use him back. Use him to get over this fear of sex because if you don't, no matter what, all you'll think about is him. You'll never get him out of your system. Men use women for sex all the time. This is a new century girl; women can use men all we want and not feel an ounce of guilt."

"It's too complicated."

"Only if you make it, Nicole. He's there all alone in that beautiful house, just waiting for you to knock on the door at night. Don't let him speak or reason because when he does, he'll only make you nervous. Take control of the situation and use him. If it hurts, don't make him stop. Just tell him what feels right and what doesn't. Men like it when a woman lets them know how to make love to them."

"It sounds easy, but I know it's not."

"It's only as hard as you make it out to be. You can easily get to him. He's waiting for you. Once it's over with, all you have to do is get up and leave."

"Just leave?"

"Yes. Don't even tell him you're going. Wait until he's asleep and leave."

Nicole only stared into space, trying to find out where her courage would be just to show her face up in front of him.

"The perfect time would be tomorrow night. That's when I will be off both jobs and can come to the hospital while you're at his place," Cleo hinted.

Her stomach felt like her muscles were tying in knots at the thought of seeing him again. "I don't know if I can get over the fact that he used me, Cleo."

"That doesn't matter. You're going there to get what you want. That's what's wrong with women now. You let your personal feelings get in the way of enjoyment. You'll get no pleasure out of life if you allow that to happen, Nicole. Like I said, use him. Use him until you get tired."

Nicole blushed clear down to her toes as she stood up. "They should be done with Nanna by now, Cleo. I'll call you tomorrow if I need you."

"Call me early so I can bring everything you need here." She kissed her cheek and left.

Nicole sat by Nanna's side and thought hard about what she wanted to do. When the nurse came in, she questioned if there was a psychologist on duty for family care. The nurse nodded and gave her instructions to the room.

"I'll be here until nine to watch over her."

Nicole thanked her and left out in search of someone else to speak to.

Chapter 12

Ethan stared thoughtfully into the fire, wondering what he would do once he finished this project. Most likely, sell it and find something else to involve himself on. James had notified him today, they were done with the external structure of their recent project on a seven-story apartment building. He knew if he threw himself into his work more, he could forget about it. But it was so difficult when his thoughts were consumed with her. As far as he knew, she was by Nanna's side and no one was positive if Nanna would live past the end of this week before she would need a machine to breathe.

Cleo had suggested that he go to the hospital, but what could he possibly demand? Would she ever allow him to finish making love to her? That would be rich. His luck would run out and Lynne would probably be present and laugh to high heaven at him when Nicole slapped him across the face.

Still, it bothered him that she was going around thinking the act of making love was horrible and it was all because of him. He didn't want her like that and he wanted to find out if he could bring her pleasure.

'*So go and get her!*' he told himself. Going to the closet by the door, he snatched the familiar white sheepskin jacket and tossed it on. Opening his front door, he almost collided right into the very woman he was thinking of.

"Were you about to leave?" she asked, raising a dark curious brow.

He could only shake his head from a loss of words at the beautiful sight of her. His eyes went from the tip of her flowing lightly curled face to the high pumps accentuating the beautiful ankles. Her long black coat was opened to reveal the black after-five velvet dress with the split on the side. When he looked back at her and was about to speak, she stepped forward and pressed her index finger to his lips.

"Just...one...night, Ethan."

With no explanation other than that, he drew her in his arms and carried her inside. His mouth didn't stop praising her for the decision, until after he'd kicked the door closed, went up the steps and was laying her on the bed. Her hands moved the jacket off his broad shoulders and then she started unbuttoning his plaid shirt. When she got that off, she threw it to the floor. He didn't want to stop touching her, too afraid she would change her mind. His lips moved to her neck as his fingers worked frantically at the zipper of her dress in the back. Once he

moved that aside, pushing it down past her hips, he worked on the bra and worshipped in her beauty she allowed him to reveal.

She trembled underneath his worshipful wet kisses as he drew the taunt nipple into his mouth. She placed his hand on the other breast and he gently massaged the firm aroused flesh. Her sighs of pleasure were encouraging to him as he moved downward, licking, kissing and tantalizing the smooth chocolate flesh with his tongue and hands.

Tasting the sweetness of her aroused him as well. His lips were ever so soft as he suckled the nectar then delved deep into the warmth that yearned for his touch.

"More," she whispered.

Ethan spread her legs wider, giving her pleasure beyond belief until she cried out his name and he felt the pulsing eruption of her orgasm surround his fingers that had assisted his mouth in bringing her to pleasure. Arising to ease her trembling body in his arms, the full length of him slipped inside of her as her back arched to meet him. He could feel her nails dig into his back and her legs lock around his waist. She was almost oblivious to the world around him. But as her hips arched higher and higher, he met each thrust, enjoying her responses to her movements and watching as she praised him with her voice and body for the Valhalla he took her to. Never in his life had he given so much of himself to a woman in order to please her. He knew as he brought her to the finale with him and tears fell down her cheek, there had been no pain, but pure unadulterated enjoyment for the both of them.

He kissed her with all the passion inside of him and she equaled his as her body seemed to float above everything and join his senses. They became one and it didn't matter about what the past had wrought or the present had to offer. The here and now was all that mattered to them at that point and reality was like a dream far, far away. He held her close, never wanting this moment to end, but yet not wanting to go on, afraid he might make her sore.

A giggle escaped her lips and he looked down at her with questions in his eyes.

"Now I know why the French call it little death."

He smiled then gasped as she gyrated her hips with him still inside of her. Just as he started to speak, she again placed her finger on his lips and pulled him close.

Her brown eyes danced in excitement as she whispered, "Can I have more?"

A wicked grin curled his lips. "Just tell me when to stop."

Nicole never wanted him to stop.

###

The early morning sun awakened her and she tried to sit up, but a secure arm over her chest prevented this action. Looking over at him, a well-satisfied grin was on his lips, but he was asleep. Sliding down, she was able to unravel her body from around his without waking him up. She located her dress under the bed and found her coat at the bottom of the steps along with her shoes. Nicole didn't dare try to awake him by trying to find her underwear.

Hurriedly, she slipped out and returned to the hospital to change places with Cleo.

"I forgot to tell Marvin that some lady came by the Laundromat the other day." She fished in her wallet and pulled out a card. "Her name was Ebony Reed of Executive Business Basic."

"That's the insurance on the business." She took the card. "Why would she come by? I sent the check two months in advance."

Cleo shrugged. "Heck if I know. I really meant to tell Marvin because I thought it strange for her to come by too, especially after business hours. She said she was heading home and no one had returned her phone calls."

Nicole thanked her and Cleo left. It was eight in the morning and she decided to see if Ms. Reed was in her office. "Good morning, Ms. Reed. My name is Nicole Gray; I was told you came by Nanna's Laundromat. What was this concerning?"

"Oh yes, Ms. Gray." There was some fumbling of paper, then Ms. Reed said, "The check received a month ago, payment was stopped."

"Stopped? The bank stopped payment on your check?"

"Yes. I've been leaving messages, but no one has returned any of my phone calls. I figured you went with another company, but something kept telling me to get some kind of response from your business. So I went by yesterday because I was visiting someone over there and decided to stop in."

"I'll check into it, but I'm positive there shouldn't be a stop payment on the business insurance. How much is owed?"

"Really, it's just two hundred dollars because you sent an overpayment in the summer that was adjusted to be caught up."

"My grandmother has fallen ill and I'm doing vigil at her bedside. I could get the money to you tomorrow."

"Well now that I have you on the phone, I'm worried I shouldn't let another night pass without renewing this. Where are you? I could come by there and pick it up by this afternoon."

She figured she could get down to the hospital's ATM machine and get the money out of her own account, then just reimburse herself when Mr. Parker decided in her favor. If he didn't, then she would discuss having him reimburse her. Ms. Reed agreed to this and Nicole gave her the address of the hospital. When she hung up, she found her phone book and called the bank to find out that Marvin had put a stop payment on all of last month's checks she had sent out and withdrawn all the money from the accounts and closed them.

She immediately called Armando Bellini to alert him of this fact. Armando assured her he would be on the next Bellini jet to Detroit by the morning, no later. She could meet him at the hotel so they could discuss what happened. She informed him that she had not heard from Parker Mills yet, but would know by the end of the day what the decision would be.

Armando had no doubt that Mr. Mills would join her. She was honored by his support in the matter. Once she got off the phone with him, she spoke with the doctor who, as always, had disappointing news. He gave Nanna less than three days to live.

"Especially if we don't put her on the machine."

Nicole cried a little for her grandmother, knowing this last episode had definitely put Nanna very close to death's door and soon she would be joining Grandpa and Ecole. She remembered Nanna's words of encouragement and how she had never really got to tell her about Ethan.

When she had gone to her the next night, Nanna had only said that whatever Nicole chose, she would be happy with the decision. "It doesn't matter about his past, Nicole, nor about what the future holds. If at the present he makes you happy, allow yourself to trust what you feel. Allow him to make you happy. If you think he could make you happy for the rest of your life, let him. Never deny the pleasures of life because they are so few and so very frequent."

Curling up in the chair, she fell asleep, thinking about Ethan and their night together. Going to him had been the best decision. She felt so open and free and the pains of yesterdays were gone away. Nicole was ready to live and love...she just wished she didn't feel she could live and love Ethan for the rest of her life.

When they took away the lunch tray for Nicole, she was surprised to see her mother standing at the doorway looking at the bed. Nicole stiffened, knowing Lynne had not seen her yet because she was seated behind the door. Stepping fully in the room and letting the door close, Lynne gasped as she laid her eyes on Nicole.

This had been the reason for Nicole staying at her grandmother's side. She didn't want Marvin or Lynne near her because she knew one of them had caused this latest episode.

"I spoke to the doctor," Lynne said quietly. "They said she won't make it past the end of the week."

"Nanna's survived this long. I'm hoping that's not true, but I'm also realistic." She stood up and went to Nanna's side, as if to protect her. "Why are you here?" She had her back to Lynne.

"I wanted to see her."

"You should have done that a long time ago Lynne, when she was well. If you came to make peace with her, you're a little too late."

"I didn't come here for a fight, Nicole. I came to see you and my mother."

"You still think of her as that?"

"I can't deny her."

"You've denied me; I figured you were on a roll."

Lynne bit her lip. "Like I said Nicole, I didn't come here for a fight." She came closer to the bed, but kept her distance as if she was scared to get any closer. "You were the daughter she wished she had in me."

Nicole faced Lynne. "Someone had to give her joy after Ecole died."

"It wasn't fair that she tried to make me into someone I wasn't."

"That's not what she was asking. She just wanted you to be happy. That's all Nanna ever wanted from anyone. You were ashamed of her." She took Nanna's hand. "Make your peace and leave."

"I can't think of what to say now that you're both here. I've always thought about what I would say to you when the time came Nicole. But now that it's here, I can't think of what would make the hurt go away."

"Nothing. Nothing you could say would make me believe you were sorry for the abuse I've suffered because of you. Nanna always said action speaks louder than any words."

"Then there's nothing I could do."

"Nothing."

Lynne bowed her head in defeat and quietly left.

Quietly to herself, Nicole said looking at Nanna, "She could have tried." Yet it wasn't in Lynne's nature to try to think of something to make things better. Guilt was probably plaguing her.

Near four o'clock, she received a message from Ethan telling her to meet him near downtown at a new apartment complex they were in the process of working on. She really wanted to go and called Cleo to see if she could bring her daughter for just a couple of hours.

"I'll come there myself."

"Shouldn't you be at work?"

"I should, but Marvin called and said not to report on the shift today. There was some mumbling about changes in the company and that until I was called, there wouldn't be any more shifts there."

"Mr. Mills must have gone with my decision again."

"I'll be over in an hour."

###

When Cleo arrived with some blue jeans and a sweater, she carried a bag. "I brought some nice clothes for you. Go on in and wash up, then change into these khakis and tweed sweater. If you're going to go to him, you have to look nice."

"I don't want him to think I want to be with him, but his note sounded urgent. It said he wanted to talk with me."

"Did it say about what?"

Nicole shook her head. "The least I could do was to hear what he has to say."

"And find out if things can change? If he can apologize, right?"

"I don't think it's about apologizing, Cleo. I do want to see him again."

Cleo's eyes brightened up, looking very positive.

"Don't go jumping to conclusions."

Her friend only smiled secretly and started to do Nicole's hair out of habit. When she was done extracting all the information about the encounter out of Nicole, she passed her the car keys and wished her a good time. Nicole only rolled her eyes heavenward, gave Nanna's warm cheeks a kiss, then left the hospital with a bounce to her step, knowing if Ethan proclaimed his love for her, she would just accept him and...be happy.

Chapter 13

The sound of someone calling him pulled him out of the hard sleep. Opening up his eyes and seeing Parker Mills standing over his bed looking very amused was not what he was expecting. He looked over at the empty pillow beside him and wondered what the hell had happened to her.

"You know they invented cell phones in order to reach the unreachable," Parker said, picking up the phone off the bed stand. "When you turn them off, it makes the invention useless." He tossed the cell phone on the bed near Ethan's head.

Ethan checked the screen of the phone and frowned hard. "It's five in the afternoon?"

"Yes and the whole world was looking for you up until noon. The foreman from the other site came over here to check on you per your brother's insistence and found you sleep. Your brother told him to leave you be and that he would handle the problem. But when you still hadn't returned any of the calls he has left, he asked me to come by since I was looking for you too. Busy night?" Parker sat in a chair near the door with that silly smirk on his face.

"I've never overslept in my entire adult life."

"Must have been some girl then."

Ethan jumped out the bed, wrapping the covers around him. "Why were you and my brother looking for me?"

"Two different reasons. James wanted to let you know there was a break into the office last night in Auburn Hills. Someone stole the master keys to the Grand Boulevard sight near downtown. He only put a special watch on the site, but thought you should check it out later on tonight if you had a chance. He didn't think it was important because on the master key set was a gold-plated lock that he figured the perps really wanted."

Ethan went into the bathroom and slipped on a pair of jeans and sweater. "What was the reason you were looking for me?"

"I wanted to give your friend the good news of merging the business with her. I met with her brother and I was so upset at the fraudulent document he gave me. I let him know he would not be receiving the final payments for the sale of his share of the business due to the fact that the shares he thought he was selling did not belong to him."

He stopped what he was doing. Considering the kind of damage Marvin had done to Nicole before, Ethan had a feeling Marvin would not be a happy camper about being refused the money. "So you didn't give him the money?"

"Hell no, it didn't belong to him. I told him what his percentage would have been and how he even now owed Nicole's and Mrs. Gray's money that didn't belong to him. He was livid-what?"

Ethan grabbed his shoes and shoved them on. "We need to get to Nicole."

"Why?"

"I have a feeling; Marvin still intends to get that money."

"He can't get it. Not unless Nicole is..." His voice faltered. "Should I have given the money to him, Ethan?"

"The bastard deserves a kick in the ass above all things. That money rightfully belongs to her grandmother and Nicole."

Parker followed him out and they drove Parker's tan Lexus S-Class to the hospital where Nanna was at. On the way, Ethan called the detective working on the case against Marvin and told him to meet them at the hospital. Parker stayed in the car and waited for him in front of the hospital.

When he entered Nanna's room, Cleo immediately asked him, "What are you doing here?"

"Where's Nicole?"

"She's supposed to be meeting you in ten minutes at your site near downtown. You sent her a message this afternoon."

"I didn't send anything."

Cleo looked a little confused. "She showed me the note. It said to meet you at the site. You wanted to talk."

Ethan remembered the missing keys and his heart pounded in fear. "How long ago did she leave?"

"About twenty minutes ago. If traffic wasn't bad, she should be arriving in my car in about five."

He handed Cleo the detective card after he wrote something on the back. "Call him on the cell number and tell him to meet me at the address on the back. Let him know there might be trouble and he needs to hurry."

Cleo caught his arm. "Is she in trouble?"

"I don't know." He rushed out and jumped back in Parker's car. "Let's get down to the site."

Upon arriving at the site by the back entrance, the security vehicle was strangely parked near the front of the opened gate. Parker stopped his own vehicle nearby and they walked up to the vehicle.

"He's dead," Parker said before Ethan got a close-up look to see the neck slashed. Ethan looked around the place and saw Cleo's car parked at the front entrance. She wouldn't have seen this so she was walking right into a trap. He went to the security trailer to find the gun the personnel always left in the top cabinet, but it was missing. Parker followed him and let him know the gun on the officer was missing as well.

A computer blipped and they saw the newly installed elevator sensor was activated, meaning someone had just stepped into the booth and according to the readout, was heading to the top floor.

"Get on your car phone and call the police. Let them know someone's broken into the building and they have a weapon," Ethan said, heading out the door. "I'm taking the steps up to the seventh floor, but the signals not good up there so come after you finish the call." He didn't even wait for Parker to speak again before he ran out the door and headed for the front of the building.

###

Her heart was racing as the elevator inched closer to the seventh floor. The doors opened to a dimly lit hallway, but candles were placed on the floor in a trail leading to a back unfinished large space that curved around. Nicole called out Ethan's name, but no one answered.

Before going around the corner, she paused, thinking maybe this was a bad idea. Her senses were jumping about like crazy, telling her something wasn't right. Yet when she heard the soft music start to play, she told herself that it was just her own self-doubt talking to her and that he would make everything alright as he always did.

Coming around the corner, her eyes widened as millions of candles illuminated the entire space. Her heart soared and at that point, she knew she loved Ethan.

A click behind her gave her a start, but she composed herself and slowly turned around to face the love of her life.

###

The door to the staircase was locked and the main elevator didn't come back down. According to the illuminated sign above the elevator's doorway, the car stayed on the seventh floor.

Ethan had to go around the long way to the service elevator that was still down in the basement and not working yet. After prying open the doors, he began to climb up the ladder, hoping when he got to the top he could remember how to jimmy open the switch from the inside, like someone had shown him so long ago.

###

Marvin pointed the gun straight at her chest five feet away from her, looking as if death had walked all over him, but forgot to take him away. "You stupid bitch," he sneered. "Did you think you could take my money and not pay for what you did?"

"It wasn't yours," she barely whispered.

"Shut up!!" he screamed shaking the gun.

Nicole stiffened, very afraid to take her eyes off of the barrel aimed at her.

"Your stupid grandmother gave it to me. Even the responsibility of raising a brat while she decided to get sick."

The doorway to the stairs opened and Lynne entered. Marvin smiled wickedly, "We did it baby. Now everything will be ours."

Nicole looked accusingly at Lynne as her mother went to stand beside Marvin. He kissed her cheek and neck sloppily, then turned his attention back to Nicole. "I told you she'd come if we sent her a message from that bastard."

"You knew all along he planned on doing this?" Nicole asked Lynne incredulously.

"Knew?" Marvin exasperated. "She planned everything. When she was ready to leave that sorry bastard of a husband, she knew she couldn't get a dime from him. So she decided we could both share the wealth Nanna had accumulated."

"Why? If you needed anything, Nanna would have given it to you, Lynne. She loved you still no matter how bad you treated her."

Lynne only pursed her lips tightly together and lowered her head to the ground.

"Who the fuck cared what Nanna would have given? It was a matter of what Nanna had that she wouldn't sell," Marvin said.

Nicole glared at the insidious man. "The business was Nanna's hard work and she didn't want to sell it. You knew this, yet you still went behind her back and sold it illegally to Parker Mills."

"Then you went and bought it back with my money."

"I only took what was rightfully mine and Nanna's."

He cocked the gun and just as he pulled the trigger, Lynne knocked the gun to the right. Nicole felt the bullet whiz past her ear and a white hot pain shot through her temple.

Marvin whirled around from the force of the gun and Lynne. "What the fuck is wrong with you?" he bellowed, facing her.

Lynne now stood holding Nicole behind her as Nicole clutched her forehead to stop the blood from oozing into her face. The bullet had nicked her temple and Nicole felt a little dizzy.

Lynne took a gun out of her coat pocket and aimed it at Marvin.

"Have you lost your damn mind woman?" Marvin exclaimed.

"No I've gained a conscious Marvin, which one of us should have done a long time ago before we even thought about bringing a baby in this world."

Nicole cleared her thoughts, straining to hear what her mother was saying.

"A whore with a conscious, Lynne. That don't go together at all."

"I'm a mother with a conscious and if you know what's good for you, you'll walk away from all of this."

"Hell naw. I fucked your scrawny ass for twenty years knowing that one day, I'd get a piece of this shit. You think I'm gonna turn my back on this now? After all the shit I've been through." He aimed the gun at Lynne now. "Get the hell out the way. Let me take care of the brat and we won't have to worry none about nobody."

Lynne shook her head. "I'm not moving. Don't you see every hurt she's ever felt was because of us? I'm not going to make her suffer anymore, Marvin. You made Ecole suffer from the truth of us. Don't you think that's enough?"

"Ecole never knew," Marvin insisted incredulously.

"Yes she did. She confronted me the day before she died Marvin. That's why she went into labor so early. I told her that Nicole was our child and she couldn't handle the betrayal. We killed her just like we did Nanna."

"Shut up bitch!" he sneered angrily.

"Nicole doesn't deserve it. Not like this."

"Then what the fuck do you suggest, we overdose her on some shit? Or why don't we just drag her to the roof and throw her over? Either way, she's dying tonight and the old woman will be gone by the end of the week from what the doctors say. They'll think the brat committed suicide or was just part of the city crime statistics. We'll be sole heirs to that woman's fortune and no one will be the wiser. Now move the fuck out the way so we can get this over with."

"No!" Lynne screamed. "I won't let you do it."

"Fine, then you'll both die. It don't matter none to me when I'll get everything." He prepared to fire the gun again.

"I'll shoot Marvin," she warned, holding the gun with both hands. "Put the gun down."

"You first."

Their standoff held a moment of silence, then the blast sent Nicole back from the weight of Lynne falling over on her. She looked over to see Marvin lying the other way and a pool of blood up by his head. The gun had shot off half of his skull.

Getting up carefully from underneath Lynne, she saw her mother clutching her stomach as warm blood seeped through her fingers. Her breathing was shallow and her big brown eyes were big as saucers.

"It's okay," Nicole assured her. "I'm going to get help." She got up and started to the doorway, but bumped into the large figure that instantly came in front of her. She shrieked, but then realized it was just Ethan and hugged him tightly.

"Jesus, baby." He frantically looked her over as she repeatedly assured him she was fine.

"Please Ethan, you've got to get help for my mother. She's dying. Marvin shot her in the stomach."

"Are you fine?"

"Yes." She cupped his face to assure his racing panic. "Get help right away, please love."

Understanding lifted his concerned frown and he rushed over to the staircase, running past Marvin's dead body and out the door. Sirens were real close, but Nicole was intent on saving her mother's life.

Kneeling back to her mother, she rubbed her forehead for comfort. Lynne opened her eyes and tears ran down her cheek. There was a lot of pain on her face, but Nicole had a feeling it had nothing to do with her physical suffering.

Nicole reached down and applied pressure over her mother's hands. "Just hold still, Lynne."

"I'm...sorry Nicole. I should have realized you were the innocent a long time ago. It wasn't your fault."

"Don't talk, just hold still," she whispered desperately to Lynne. "Save your strength."

Lynne pried her hand from under Nicole and grasped her shoulder. "Do you love him?"

Nicole saw the intense look in her mother's eyes and couldn't help but tell the truth. "Yes, I love him."

This seemed to relieve Lynne for the moment and she relaxed a bit and rested her hand on top of Nicole's. "I had to know and he has to know. He needs love, Nicole. He needs more than I could ever give 'cause I could never love myself. I don't blame Nanna for my evils. I was trying to compete with Ecole and I should have known I never could. But I should have accepted who I was. I never could even after she died, knowing Marvin and I had betrayed her. I'm sorry. Then Nanna found out about the betrayal which caused...her first stroke. I thought if I could get the money, I would be happy. But it wouldn't have... mattered." She sobbed. "When I saw that pain Ethan caused you by breaking your heart, I knew then what I did to you was wrong. I knew nothing in this world could ever be done to make up for what I've done in the past. Oh Nicole, I should have never done this to you."

"Apology accepted, Mother. Now please save your strength."

The strangest smile came to Lynne's face. "Say it again, daughter."

Nicole kissed her mother's cheek. "I forgive you, Mother."

Lynne was fading fast now. "Tell...Nanna, I'm...sorry too."

"She knows. Nanna always knew you'd come around."

A faraway look appeared in Lynne's face. "I can see her Nicole. I can see Nanna."

"Where?"

"She's so pretty Nicole." Lynne gasped and brightened. "I see Ecole and Daddy. They're waiting for me."

"No, Mother. Please stay here," Nicole begged, laying her head on her mother's shoulder. "There's so much we have to do together."

"You'll be fine. Nanna says you'll be fine and Ethan will keep you happy. I know he will." Lynne leaned her head over and kissed Nicole on her forehead. "Don't worry. Nanna said the Lord and her will be watching over you." Lynne's body fully relaxed and Nicole felt her heartbeat slowing. She cried out as the paramedics pushed her away to get to Lynne.

She stood up and Ethan moved to her side to hold her as she cried hard while the paramedics desperately tried to revive Lynne. After forty five minutes, Lynne was pronounced dead.

Ethan guided her away, holding her steady. But Nicole felt the earth spinning so fast that she couldn't take a straight step. Maybe this was it for her as well. The nick in her forehead seemed to seep so much blood. The warm fluid oozed down her face like a river and the loss of blood was making it hard to comprehend her surroundings, until finally she succumbed into the darkness that pulled at her consciousness.

Her body went limp in his arm and he called for help as her wound suddenly began to bleed as if it were freshly opened. He didn't know if her body had purposely clotted when she had first received the wound. But now, it was flowing blood as if there were no tomorrow. The paramedics attended her and he instructed them if they could to take her to the same hospital Nanna was at. They said they would be able to because Nicole's condition wasn't that critical.

Ethan drove Parker's car to the hospital, with Parker in the passenger side holding on for dear life, as Ethan kept up with the ambulance. Once they arrived, Parker could breathe normally and he was glad they had made it safely.

Nanna's doctor came down to check on Nicole and speak with her, but unfortunately, she was still unconscious. He told Ethan the bad news to deliver to Nicole.

It wasn't until early morning when Nicole opened her eyes to see Ethan sitting very close to her bed. He was sleep, holding her hand tight in his sleep. She heard movement by the door and saw Parker standing up from the chair.

"He's been asleep for a couple of hours. He wanted to be here when you awoke."

"Why are you here?" she asked quietly.

He shrugged. "Moral support, you could say." Parker dug his hands deep in his pants pockets. Even though he had pulled an all-nighter in the chair, he looked very well dressed with it being so early in the morning. She had a

feeling this man had an annoying streak of cleanliness. There was also an aura that he wanted to say more, but didn't know how to go about saying it. "Ethan said my big mouth got you in more trouble."

She smiled weakly. "If you didn't do it, Marvin would have found something else to be mad at me about. He intended to kill me long before you took away the money he wanted. I can understand you wanting to rub his deceit back in his face. You're forgiven."

Parker nodded his concession and left just as Ethan began to stir, awaking from his tired sleep. As soon as he saw she was awake, he leaned over and kissed her soundly, possessively.

"Will you always be at my bedside every time something happens to me?" she asked teasingly.

"I want to be there even if there's nothing wrong with you always, Nicole."

His confession seemed to shock both of them.

She looked away from him to gather her thoughts. "Are you sure you aren't trying to make up for the pain my mother caused you."

Ethan could admit his revenge was wrong. "I had every intention of stealing your heart and body, Nicole. Using you mentally like your mother had done to me. I thought I could remain impassive to you, but I think somewhere between getting revenge, I found myself becoming receptive to that inner beauty only you could have. Soon, it wasn't about Lynne or revenge; it was just about making you happy. I've done some pretty horrible things, Nic, to you and myself. All were pretty stupid." He kissed her knuckles, then elevated to her mouth, capturing her in a passionate kiss, making her feel good all over.

When he pulled away, she had the most beautiful smile on her face, but his look was regretful.

"What is it?" she asked, reaching up to smooth the furred brow of his.

"I have some bad news to give you."

"Nanna died yesterday when I was with my mother?" she guessed.

His eyes widened big as saucers and if her head didn't hurt badly, she would have laughed at the terrified look on his face. "How did you know?"

"Nanna was speaking with my mother when Lynne died."

"Are you mad you weren't at her side instead of your mother's?"

Nicole shook her head. "I'm glad I was there with my mother. Nanna wouldn't have wanted her to die alone and I think in a way, she knew her time had come. She was trying to make peace with everything and everyone."

"Did she make peace with me?"

Nicole nodded, giving him a quick kiss. "She gave us her approval by telling me to give you what she could never give."

One brow lifted in inquiry. "And what could she have given me when I could buy anything I wanted?"

"Love."

That intense look on his face made her whole body tremble. Suddenly, he buried his face in her neck, murmuring, "I don't deserve you, Nicole."

"You'll have a lifetime to make it up to me, Ethan." She pulled him in her arms and pressed her lips against his. His response was immediate.

"I love you, Nicole."

"And I love you, Ethan."

To read more of this author's work, go to her website: www.SylviaHubbard.com.

- Thaddeus and Skye Newman can be found in Dreams of Reality
- Lorenzo, Ethan's lawyer can be found in The Other Side of Love
- Parker Mills can be found in His Substitute Wife... My Sister
- Armando Bellini can be initially found in Road To Freedom and Also The Other Side of Love, plus intertwined in other stories by this author
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